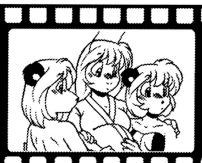
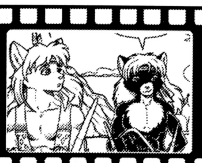
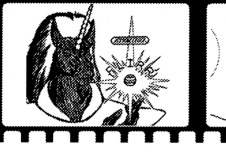
SHANDA
FANTASY ARTS
FANTASTIC
FURRY STORIES
3
JAN
2002
$4.99
GENERAL
READERS
Giacomo 2001



THE SHANDA FANTASY ARTS CREW

CAROLE CURTIS
EDITOR IN CHIEF

RICHARD THATCHER
CONVENTION CO-ORDINATOR

PAUL SEID
COMPUTER WIZARD

ROBERT TEAGUE
WORDSMITH

SHANE FISHER
ART DIRECTOR

VALLIANT VARMINT
FINANCIAL ANGEL

BOYCE GARALD KLINE JR.
HEAD OF SALES

ED GARCIA
CHARLES GRAY
MIKE OXLEY
DEBRA COLVIN
PRODUCTION STAFF

JOANNE KLINE
TRAVEL AGENT

JUSTIN RAGSDALE
JONAS SILVER
SEAN OSBORN
WEBMASTERS

BROCK HOAGLAND
MATT McCULLAR
STEVE CORBETT
TED VOLLMER
CHRIS PESL
CONVENTION STAFF

MIKE CURTIS
CHIPMUNK MASSUSE

The INNER CIRCLE

PROFILE: Shane Fisher, Art Director

Ahhh...now its time to meet Shane Fisher, eh? *cackle* Riiiight>:)

Well, a scant few of you may or may not know I am the Art Director for SFA. I sit quietly behind a Macintosh G4 and pound out logo's and color covers for both Katmandu and Extinctioners, and create backpage ads like the Furry Ninja HS ad and the World Trade Center trubite ad, and other last minute production stuffs before the book goes off to print. *begin melodramatic whine* It's mostly a thankless job. Lost in the shadow of all popular artists, writers, and ...god forbid....even the lowly inkers *COUGH* Tracers!;P Buuuut I battle on. It is kinda fun to work behind the curtain though. Your privy to the swirling tornado of carnage and disarray that is independent comics without getting TOTALLY sucked into the madness....or at least that's the illusion I'm most comfortable with.

Hmm...details details. If you want the nitty gritty, know that in the year of our lord, nineteen hundred and ninety seven, I graduated from the Joe Kubert school of Cartoon and Graphic arts. "You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy" is an apt description of that run down, New Jersey BOMB shelter of a school. There we toiled away under the careful tutelage of the art instructors. Our feeble artistic talents and weak pessimism were tempered into shining blades of artistic precision and bitter cynicism. We weren't always a happy bunch, but damn it sure was an interesting ride. I walked away with a degree in Graphic Arts, three weeks after graduation I was immediately struck down by a repetitive strain injury (Myofascial Pain Syndrome) in my drawing arm and in the following years nerve damage in my neck and Carpal Tunnel in my drawing hand. Well damn.....that pretty much shoots my future to hell now, don't it?:P But in the midst of that dark (and ongoing) point in my life I landed in the arms of Shanda Fantasy Arts. Starting out as an afore mentioned lowly inker, graduating to digital colorist after my inking abilities were destroyed, and finally to the position I am in now. As working behind a computer doesn't quite hurt me as much as drawing and inking do. I've found this to be a fun ride as well, I've met a great deal of interesting people in the process and have even been recognized ....ONCE...at a convention.:P Hell, being knee deep in furry actually landed my a furry girlfriend, how rare is that, eh?!;D Oh well, so much for stardom and my fifteen minutes. Come on ya book munkies! Quit readin this pap and get on to the story!! This is just filler cause Mike couldn't get Stan Lee to write him another preface, the hack. *is immediately struck dead by a bolt of lightning.*....Speak no ill of "The Man"

SHANE

This book is published by SHANDA FANTASY ARTS PO BOX 545 GREENBRIER ARK 72058
shandafa@cyberback.com All characters are copyrighted 2001 by their respective creators. All art and stories are copyright their respective creators. Nothing from this book may be reproduced without the express written permission of the copyright holders except for short excerpts for advertising, review and promotion. No similarity to any person place or thing is intended and any similarity is purely coincidental.

THE MAGAZINE FOR THINKING FURRIES

FANTASTIC FURRY STORIES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2 MORNING HUNT
BY THOMAS G. BRADY

6 STILL LIFE
BY DAVID COOKSEY

7 HAPPILY EVER AFTER...?
BY M. MITCHELL MARMEL

26 TREASURE GROWS THERE
BY RICHARD REID

29 HAWK ON HARRU
PART THREE
BY BROCK HOAGLAND

EDITED BY CAROLE CURTIS

FRONTISPIECE BY MARY HANSON-ROBERTS

Morning Hunt

by

Thomas G. Brady

Princess Elsinore ran for her very life down the hill top meadow and toward the fog enshrouded forest below. Her expensive frilly silk dress snagged and tore to shreds on the brambles and dried weeds, but she didn't care. All her concentration was focused on keeping her balance. One slip and the dragon would be upon her.

The open distance across the meadow was too narrow to allow even a quick pouncing flight, so the dragon lopped down the hill in pursuit. Awkward and ungainly on the ground, it shuffled and slid on the grassy slope, snorting with each step. Even so, in a flat run no mere jaguar could hope to match a dragon's speed. The gap separating them disappeared rapidly.

Fortunate for her, Elsinore had the extra moment of time her horse's life had bought. The helpless creature had died a quick death, distracting the dragon with it's frightened commotion after the evil beast's first pass. If she hadn't stooped down to free the hem of her nightgown from the dried grass at exactly the right moment, it would now be her lifeless fur and flesh digesting in the big lizard's's stomach.

She reached the fog shrouded forest first, and she didn't pause. The dragon's close hissing told her that would be fatal. She plunged right on through, making her path through the thickest stands of forest growth, a path that she hoped the beast would find difficult to follow.

The dragon smashed into the trees behind like a clap of thunder, but was indeed forced to slow its pursuit. The princess wove her path through dense thickets and between great trees the dragon could not hope to knock down. The rough branches tangled in her hair, and scraped at her exposed fur, adding the scent of blood for the dragon to follow.

What had convinced her to come out here this morning, this far from the castle, with only her night gown and a cloak for warmth? Her own lust, naturally. Her own stupidity! Sir William said he would be traveling the road to Baselton this morning, and always took the shortcut along the ridge to the meadow. Of course, the chivalrous knight would never even suggest such a clandestine meeting as she had planned, but the hint was there. He hadn't suggested any of the other times, either. But this time he had been late, leaving her freezing in the morning mist. Her silk nightgown did nothing to stop the chill, and neither did her fur, trimmed short and velvety as was proper for a lady of standing.

Her blood pounded in her veins now, any thought of chill long gone. Elsinore got away with a lot, as the King's youngest daughter. Now getting away meant something totally different: her life! Like a scared rabbit, she ducked beneath the dense undergrowth, trusting her wits to keep her ahead of the barbarous jaws of the beast.

Indeed, the further she went, the more difficult the dragon's pursuit became. It could not follow her directly through the heavy growth. She could hear it pausing, standing still, listening for her footsteps and the animals she startled out of their hiding places under the trees. She would pause as it did, her tail twitching in the mist, waiting for the crunch of its claws in the dried autumn leaves. The fog altered sounds, making distance difficult to tell. Sometimes it hunted to her left, so she moved to the right. Or was

it trying to circle around her? She kept moving down the hill, deeper into the dense forest. Always she could hear the slick sound of its tongue flicking in and out, tasting for her frightened scents.

It did not take Elsinore long to reach the bottom of the hill, the arrow straight pines now intermingled with tall, thick oaks. The fog began to thin, lifting into the canopy of the trees, as though held there by the many branches. Elsinore knew she was in deep trouble, for like the mist, the undergrowth was also thinning. It made her path easier, but that also meant the dragon could slither between the trees like water over smooth stones.

Elsinore hoped her zigzag path through the forest would confuse the dragon long enough for her to reach the castle, but in this mist she just wasn't sure how close to the castle she was. The sound of the river running at the bottom of the valley did not comfort her either. The Tiree was much too deep and the current too fast for her to cross, and besides the dragon could probably hop it without even pausing to think. The Baselton road ran parallel to the river, directly to the main north gate of the castle, but she seriously doubted she could run whatever distance remained with a dragon trying to bite her tail off.

She needed to find a way to slow the creature down if she was going to survive. But how?

An immense knot of tree limbs loomed out of the mist before her as she ran, as if some spirit of the woods quietly granted her wish. She recognized the ancient oak immediately. She used to play here as a child, not more than a mile from the castle. Its roots and trunk formed a cavern of wood, with grottos and hiding places, perhaps older than all the centuries. She could easily walk through it even as an adult, but the dragon, it would have great difficulty. If she could lure the beast in, if she could get it entangled, she might have a chance to escape.

Elsinore did not have any time to further consider her plan, for through the thinning mist she saw her hunter. The mist seemed to part before its massive body as it snuffed at the ground by a bush. The creature's massive head rose slowly, tracing her path across the clear area beneath the canopy of the huge oak.

It had no eyes. In their place were two deep pits, black and shiny like thick pitch. As light was to the eyes, so heat was to the pits, allowing the dragon to 'see' the life-force about it even in the darkest places. Her footsteps were like breadcrumbs to follow, warm and bright on the cool forest floor. She appeared ghost like standing frozen in the shadows of the tree, her tattered white silks floating with the mist, the warm black spots of her pelt glowing as bright as stars. The dragon licked its chops with a flicking tongue; death would come quick but not painless in those slobbering jaws.

It started toward her, charging like a maddened bull, head low, arm length fangs glistening in a wicked smile. In three strides it was half way to her, a cloud of dead leaves rising in its wake and swirling into the mist. She barely had time to turn and duck into the bowels of the tree.

The dragon careened into the tree with a mighty crunch. But it was the smaller roots and branches that broke, not its bones. It clawed frantically to pull its way through the tiny space, the princess climbing through to the other side, barely ahead of its snapping jaws. It came away with only a tiny slip of her dress and the fur from the white tip of her tail.

Elsinore stopped a few feet away, catching her breath. The dragon had succeeded in getting its head into the open, and one arm clawed the ground on the other side of a thick root. But it could go no further, the opening was just too small, and for all its strength and mass, the ancient tree and all its roots were stronger and more massive still.

If it couldn't go forward, then it would go back! It struggled and squirmed, but to no effect. The more the dragon tried to move, the tighter the roots of the tree gripped. It could feel the splintered wood tearing the membrane of its wings, and smell the first trickle of its cold blood.

Hell and damnation, I'm stuck!

The thunder of its roar died to a whimper as Elsinore scampered up the road to the castle.

***

The guards stood before the open gate, still trembling from the hideous noise heard a short time ago. Tails high, but quivering, their ears and eyes scanned the edges of the mist clogged forest. The captain ordered three of his troops to check out the approaches to the main road, to see if anything was truly amiss. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, until they heard faint footsteps running up the forest road, towards them.

At first the approaching figure appeared to be an evil apparition, a forest spirit in dazzling white, come to steal their manhood and then their souls. They leveled their pikes,backing toward the safety of the gate. It took only a moment, however, for their wits to wake up, and they rushed to aid their exhausted princess.

The captain's eyes ran wild over Elsinore's nearly naked form, but his honor and the solid knowledge of King Broadrick's wrath stilled any sullied thoughts. "Ah, what ... What bringsyou out so early, Lady?"

"... Dragon!" She could barely speak between gasps for breath.

At that the guards diverted at least part of their attention from her to their duty. "Dragon?! Where?"

"Back ...," she waved her hand toward the forest, "... in a tree."

"A tree?" The captain looked at his troops, who shrugged, wondering how anything as big as a dragon could get up in a tree. "Come, Lady, lets get you inside. Close the gate!"

She refused to let him help her, but pushed ahead into the outer bailey, hoping to reach the main keep before one of the guards or knights could summon her father. Every early-risen eye followed her, some with lust, some with bewilderment. They had been awakened by the bellows from the forest, and with her current appearance, she could only begin to imagine the rumors that would soon be circulating. They were certain to make the scandalous tales of her older sister's seem like those of a nun. She desperately wanted to reach the safety and comfort of her room.

A glint of shining metal halted Elsinore at the steps. Up from the lower bailey rode Sir William Brownwall, emerging from the shadows of the gate into the well lit courtyard before the keep. The morning sun glistened off his well-polished riding armor, and his family broadsword hung stylishly from his saddle. His tail was groomed to perfection, laying comfortably along his right leg, yellowish fur golden in the morning sun. The electricity flowing passionately between Elsinore and the knight was almost visible. His brown war-horse clopped steadily across the paving stones as he turned away from the main gate and toward her. His squire followed behind with a pair of smaller horses, laden with supplies, weapons, and armor.

No wonder he hadn't been out in the forest to rescue me, she fumed. He was running late, probably from having to pack all that stuff. Sir William bowed low in the saddle, "Good Morning, Your Majesty."

It took her only a moment to realize he was not addressing her, and she spun to face her father, just emerging from the grand doors at the top of the stairs.

King Broadrick's fur was as black as coal, his eyes a deep emerald green. Wearing only his hastily assembled hunting leathers, he look more like a forest beast than a king of jaguars. He gave his daughter only a brief glance, then looked directly to Sir William. "Just what the HELL is going ON out here!"

"I do not know, your majesty," replied the knight.

Elsinore moved up next to her father and took his arm. "Father, it was a dragon!"

"Dragon? What nonsense do you speak ..."

"No, believe me! I was ... it attacked me. I had to run through the forest to escape!"

"And what were you doing in the forest at this time of the morning?" The King took notice of his daughter's scrapes and cuts, his tone becoming more worried, "And a dragon? Brownwall, what do you know of this!?"

"Nothing, your majesty. I just came up from the stables, readying for my journey. Things were in a turmoil down there, someone having ...," he turned his wandering gaze from Elsinore, "borrowed a horse this very morning without actually telling the stable master. Then I heard the bellowing from the forest."

The princess looked down to her father's feet, not wanting to see his reaction, "It's dead, father. The horse, I mean. Up in the meadow on the long north ridge." Not hearing him shout in anger, she looked up to meet his stern gaze, "The dragon cleaved it in half with one sweep of its tail!"

But the King was now considering more than just dragons, "The north ridge, you say, daughter? And tell me, Sir William, where do you ride today?"

The knight shifted in his saddle, suddenly feeling the heat of the King's presence and those harsh green eyes. "To Baselton, Sire, to the tournament there. We discussed it only yesterday ..."

"Yes, yes, I remember." King Broadrick stroked his dark chin thoughtfully with a battle scarred hand, claws scraping his whiskers, "And doesn't the shortcut along that road run right over the long north ridge? Interesting." He looked up, studying the blue morning sky.

"Sire, I'm sure it is only coincidence ..."

"Tell me, Brownwall!" the King's booming voice brought instant silence to the knight, "Would you say that slaying a dragon should bring the highest reward your King can offer?" "Yes, your majesty, I would say that would be fair."

"And what do the rest of you say!"

"Yes, Sire!" shouted the guards and other members of the court now gathered in the bailey. "Then I bid you ride forth, Sir William. Forget the tournament, but instead find the foul beast that has invaded our forest and molested a princess of the kingdom. Slay it, I say! Bring its head back to us, and you shall have the hand of our daughter, Elsinore, in marriage as your reward."

Everyone erupted in a rousing cheer. Sir William smiled wide, but inwardly he was shocked. Had he been found out?

Elsinore hugged the King tightly, her joy lending fresh beauty to her haggard visage. "Thank you, Father." Then she stepped toward the knight, carefully removing a strip of her nearly shredded nightgown, one that wouldn't reveal any more of her spots. Sir William shuddered as she stroked his tail, tying the strip of silk with a neat bow just a hand span from the tip. Her favor would server a symbol of their engagement till he could return with a pair of gold tail rings for them both.

"Where should I look for this dragon?" shouted the knight over the congratulations from the crowd.

"It's stuck in a tree, about a mile down the river road." Elsinore moved back close to her father, avoiding the still lecherous gazes of the rest of the males standing in the bailey.

"Up in a tree?" Sir William raised his eyebrow. "No, no, in the base of one of the giant oaks."

"And how did it get in there?" "Followed me, silly. I lured it in." She winked at him.

No doubt you did, thought Sir William as he guided his horse toward the reopened main gate. "Fear not, my lady, for I shall return presently with the greatest trophy that can be had, the head of a dragon!" He bowed, as much to the cheering crowd as to Elsinore.

Sir William's squire pulled his horse alongside the knight's. "Sir, shall I ride ahead to Baselton and express your regrets at not being able to attend the tournament?"

"No. I shall need your assistance with the dragon."

"And what about Lady Penelope. She will be cross if you do not inform her you will not be available for dinner this evening. Not to mention not informing her of your impending marriage. And there is Lady Margaret, Lady Rebecca of Hollingsworth ..."

"Oh, do shut up, Percy!" The clomping of their horses' hooves echoed down from the stone arch of the main gate.

Yes, a perfect solution, thought the King as he watched the knight depart. His amorous younger daughter would be married off and out of trouble, and to someone she actually liked at that. More important, Brownwall would no longer be in a position to make advances to his eldest daughter, and thus to his throne. Most likely that was why he was late leaving this morning. Still, if anyone could keep this knight in line, his scheming Elsinore could.

He turned to look upon his daughter, and her disreputable attire shook him from his pleasant thoughts. "Get inside girl, you're embarrassing me! Put on some clothes befitting your station. You look like a tavern trollop."

Elsinore disappeared through the keep's main door, "Yes, Sire. Sorry, Father."

She went directly to her private room, away from her ladies in waiting. Her cuts and scrapes were minor, nothing she couldn't deal with on her own. She bolted the door securely and collapsed back against it, sinking slowly to the floor, finally allowing the morning events to catch up with her. She shook with fatigue, but not now with fear.

She had been chased by a flesh-eating, killer dragon, and had survived! She had survived not by being rescued, but by using her own wits. Of course it had been her own folly for going out in the morning, unescorted. It had cost her a horse, and one of her best nightgowns. And she was going to feel every pulled muscle for weeks.

But it had been worth it, for she was going to be married, exactly as she had planned from the start! Not quite by the same enjoyable methods she had envisioned, that was true, but deep inside, she had to admit she enjoyed all the danger. Not that she would admit it to anyone, of course. All she had to do now was keep her new husband from allowing himself to stray. Considering the hungry look he had given her on the steps outside, that shouldn't be too difficult.

For the princess who had trapped a dragon, not difficult at all.

STILL LIFE
David Cooksey 1997

FLASH!
A form standing over another.
Tail winding…no, tail flopping.
In the snow stained black with highlights of red.
A neck hunched over and head turning to face the source of the….

FLASH!
A paw reaching out towards you.
A blur of a face behind it.
The muzzle shaded in greys and black, of shadows or of fur?
The spreading black of the stained snow in the background
Grows larger as it is lit up by the…

FLASH!
Claws. Roughened pads of darkish grey.
They catch a bit of stray light, glinting and reflecting
The dying embers of light as they cover up the…

FLASH!
A neck, furred and plush, yet thick and strong
With muscles that make the fur shine. Wetly??
Knocking the view askew. Higher and higher,
As the sky shows the crescent moon in a…

FLASH!
Stars twirling, whirling; leaving line of light
First white, then black. Then white again.
The images burned as the camera fell with a..

FLASH!
Foot, long and narrow, black fur now for sure.
Ice crystals from the snow glimmering, glittering.
As they perch atop the line of ankle As it kicks the view which rolls up and…

FLASH!
The red ripped shreds of my jacket. Windbreaker broken by something wilder
Than any that graced a mounting rain
In the storm through which lightning…

FLASH!
Bare flesh exposed to view and steaming
Shoulder thru fragments of red nylon.
A hand, not furred, pulling them away.
In haste, not in fright, in the motion of…

FLASH!
The fangs reaching out to my frail form.
A beckon call to join in striding the night.
As they close on me and the bites comes down, Joining in the…
FLESH!

Happily Ever After...?

A Tale of the Temporal Corps

by Matthew Mason, Major, Temporal Corps
as told to M. Mitchell Marmel
©1998 M. Mitchell Marmel

Part I

Special Agent Adriana Marie Vultoora was good at her work.

This, of course, was what caused a lot of the trouble.

And it's where I come in to the story.

My name's Mason. I wear the winged timepiece emblem of the Temporal Corps proudly, and I help the Corps fulfill its mission of maintaining law, order and the original turn of events throughout the alternities.

Of course, I'm not alone. The Temporal Corps has tens of thousands of operatives, recruited from pretty much every time frame and every dimensional level.

Our task isn't easy, and some of our operatives do break under the strain.

Frankly, I'm surprised it doesn't happen more often...

***

The Canadian Rockies, late 1800s:

"Nyah-hah-haaaah!" Dangerous Doug DeBrew chuckled. He pulled his lanky six-foot black-clad figure erect and twirled his long black mustachios evilly. "So, my pretty, are you willing to sign over the deed to your father's silver mine?"

"You BEAST! You CAD! NEVER!!!" Sweet Sue Summerville shrieked, struggling against the ropes that bound her to the large log in the sawmill.

"Very well, then, you doom YOURSELF!" DeBrew cried, throwing the levers that started the giant saw blade and put the log carrying the helpless maid towards its evil kiss...

Approximately two minutes later, Lance Sterling of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police burst through the sawmill door. "Unhand her, you...foul...fiend?!" The corpse of Dangerous Doug Debrew, eyes open and staring, was transfixed to the log (stopped with the now-unconscious Sue a safe 25 feet away) by a long spear, apparently made of some sort of lightweight metal...

Special Agent Adriana Marie Vultoora was good at her work.

***

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away:

"Rebel ships approaching, my lord. No battle cruisers, just fighters."

"Prepare my craft." The evil Lord rose from his throne. "We shall meet them with fighters as well..."

Certain movie producers and directors notwithstanding, space does not conduct sound very well. It does, however, conduct light quite well.

The villainous Lord pressed the start button in his personal fighter.

The resulting vaporization of himself, his craft and every other fighter in the hangar bay caused a massive chain reaction which totally destroyed the Imperial battle station.

And the Rebel forces had a really nifty view of this before they turned home in relieved confusion.

Special Agent Adriana Marie Vultoora was good at her work.

***

The Old West, again in the late 1800s:

The high noon train had just departed, and the Killer and his band of desperadoes were so busy strapping on guns and making plans to kill the sheriff that they totally ignored the fashionably dressed lady who had detrained on the other side and was opening her violin case...

"Will! WILL!!! You CAN'T go out there! They'll kill you! It's our WEDDING DAY!!!"

"I'm sorry. I have to do my sworn-"

Sheriff Will Kane's words to his wife were cut off by an enormous crackling roar coming from the vicinity of the train station.

"What the-? Stay put. I'd better check this out."

Sheriff Will Kane could only stare, mouth agape. The bodies of the Killer and his henchmen sprawled in a large pool of blood on the platform. A ragged row of holes punctured the station wall behind them. Sickened, Will turned away. A gleam of light caught his eye. On the other side of the tracks, a heap of

empty brass cartridges shone in the sun. Will picked one of the brass shells up and examined the base. ".45 ACP. What the HELL is THAT?"

Special Agent Adriana Marie Vultoora was good at her work.

***

Somewhere in Storybook Land:

"Little pig, little pig, let me come in!"

"Not by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin!"

"Then I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll..."

Breath-activated claymore mines disguised as front-door decorations are directional devices, so the little house made of straw was left largely intact. The upper torso of the Big Bad Wolf, however, was not quite so fortunate. In fact, the term 'wolfburger' comes to mind.

Special Agent Adriana Marie Vultoora was good at her work.

***

I hate mornings. And being woken up by annoying telephones doesn't help any. I fumbled for the screeching communications device. "What EES it, MAN?! What? Oy. Uh-huh. Okay, Colonel, we'll be there in half an hour."

"'Morning, luv. What is the job?" Lieutenant-Commander Tali Hartoh-Mason, my wife and partner, an attractive brunette felinoid with tan fur and a longish tail, yawned, stretched, swung her legs over the side of the bed and started for the bathroom. As always, I enjoyed the sight.

I gave her a wry smile. "'Morning, sweetheart. Another 'White Knight' on the loose. We're due over at HQ at 0730."

"Shit! That is going to be trouble..."

"You said it, babe..."

***

"...Special Agent Adriana Vultoora. Humanoid vixen, red fur, blonde hair. One of our best agents. Concientious, caring, empathic-got very high marks in training..."

"A bit too empathic, eh, Colonel?" I said, wryly.

Colonel Grey, a whitehaired gentleman retired from a global security agency (and my boss), looked, if anything, more tired than I felt. I could sympathize, a little. It's tough being at the top. "Precisely.

We've all seen the "White Knight" syndrome before. An operative gets too involved... decides that something SHOULD be done about all those storybook villains..."

"And starts interfering with fiction." I nodded. "Yeah, I know the feeling. Lord knows, I've been tempted enough..."

Tali asked, "Why have we not launched interdicts against her? Stop her before she can do the deeds?"

Grey put on a pedantic look and indicated a chart on the wall behind him. "She's set up portable tension points with a one mile/year radius near each of her interferences. Anyone or anything attempting to shift into those loci without the proper codes will be destroyed."

I grimaced. "Nasty. And thorough."

Tali nodded agreement. "And the bleedthrough from the tension points means that there is no way of tracing her next stop."

Colonel Grey steepled his hands. "Nonetheless, your mission is to track Vultoora down and bring her in- preferably alive."

"THAT is going to be tricky."

"Not really." Tali had a 'no problem' look on her face.

I turned to Tali. "What do you have in mind?"

"Simple, really. Since we can not go out and find her..."

"We let her find us!"

"Precisely. And I know JUST the juicy little scenario she is going to hit, sooner or later..." Tali proceeded to explain her theory.

Colonel Grey nodded agreement with Tali's plan. "Well, good luck, you two. You can draw anything you need for the mission out of stores."

"It's not LUCK, Colonel," I replied archly. "It's looks and ability that count."

"Good looks and ability, then..." Grey replied, dryly.

***

Any enforcement operative worth his salt knows that waiting for the opposition to make its move is the toughest part. And the reports coming in didn't help any...

One night in Gotham City, a well-known doctor was out walking with his wife and son. A thug waited in an alley, looking around the corner at the approaching trio. He was about to shoot and kill the boy's parents in a holdup attempt.

THWACK!!!

Or maybe not.

The thug was now unconscious. Adriana, dressed in traditional streetwalker garb of tight striped top, tight black miniskirt, black net stockings and heels, held a broken baseball bat.

Special Agent Adriana Marie Vultoora was good at her work.

***

Two trucks collided. One, marked "DANGER! HAZARDOUS WASTES!", leaked a glowing fluid towards a sewer grate. Adriana ran towards the accident scene, pulled an ACME Spill-zorber from her purse and placed it around the sewer grate, blocking the flow of the glowing fluid.

Four turtles never got a mutagen bath.

Special Agent Adriana Marie Vultoora was good at her work.

***

Grandma's house. Grandma was in bed; Red Riding Hood and the Hunter were standing by her side. Another Big Bad Wolf, this one wearing a red riding hood, is lying on the floor, badly bullet-riddled. The Hunter gingerly held an AK-47 by the forward grip at arm's length.

Grandma said, "I don't rightly KNOW what happened...This blonde fox lady wearing a red riding hood locked me in the closet! After a while, I heard shooting, then nothing until you showed up..."

Special Agent Adriana Marie Vultoora was good at her work.

***

...At the Seven Dwarves' house...

"Here, dearie, a nice red apple for you-"

CRACK!!! The apple disintegrated under the impact of a high-powered rifle bullet.

"Wha-?"

CRA-CRACK!!! Snow White recoiled in horror as the old crone's head shattered under the impact of two more bullets.

In the nearby woods, a blonde vixen grinned triumphantly, holding a smoking Mannlicher-Carcano "Kennedy Special" with telescopic sight attached.

Special Agent Adriana Marie Vultoora was good at her work.

***

...And in the magical land of Oz...

The Wicked Witch of the West flew furiously on her broom, gazing over her left shoulder with a terrified expression; about five feet behind her, a Stinger missile quickly closed on its target.

Below, a blonde vixen dressed in a gingham dress and holding a missile launcher on her shoulder peered through the sight, a smug look on her face.

Special Agent Adriana Marie Vultoora was good at her work.

***

I've never been entirely comfortable working in 'toon alternities. However, I was convinced by Tali's assertion that Adriana would show up here eventually. And when she did, we'd be ready...

We were in the woods, sitting side-by side under a tree in appropriate medieval garb. The remains of a picnic lunch were nearby.

I burped gently. "I must admit, Merrie Olde England is kind of nice just about now..."

Tali wrinkled her nose. "Yes, if you do not count no roads, no sanitation to speak of and a tyrant king usurper with a bunch of...goons, right? It is, how do you say, swell!"

I grinned. "Precisely why you chose it, neh?"

Tali leaned back, hands behind her head, eyes shut. "Yes. I figure Adriana will not be able to resist when the Sheriff of Nottingham captures Friar Tuck and sets him up for a hanging a couple of days from now..."

"It doesn't hurt her chances that she's nearly a dead ringer for Maid Marian, eh?" I laid my head in Tali's lap.

Tali started running her fingers through my hair. Her expression was fierce and determined. "Well, when the bitch TRIES something - we HAVE her!"

***

A few nights later...

The courtyard of King John's castle was dark and still. A sleepgas grenade landed at the feet of the guards; they collapsed silently. Another grenade flew in the window of King John's bedroom and a cloud of sleepgas puffed out.

Special Agent Adriana Marie Vultoora was good at her work.

At the dungeon entrance, the Sheriff of Nottingham snored gently, unaware that anything was amiss, when the sound of soft footsteps woke him.

"Gzzsnurk-eh? Who-?"

Adriana, dressed as Maid Marian sans hat, appeared in the shadows. She was visible only as a silhouette and a pair of malevolently glowing eyes.

The Sheriff rose to his feet, now as alert as he normally got. "Oh, it's YOU, Miz Marian! Come to turn yourself in? Hee-yuk!"

Adriana emerged into the light, holding a stainless steel Smith and Wesson .44 Magnum revolver with an eight inch barrel in a two-handed grip. Her face was contorted into an unpleasant snarl.

The Sheriff recoiled in horror, eyes wide.

"You fat FUCK! You are HISTORY!" The muzzle of the .44 pointed at the tip of the Sheriff's nose.

"Ulp."

"And your wimpy boss is next-!"

At this point, I stepped out of the shadows, holding my modified Walther P-38 on the foxmorph. "It's over, Adriana."

Adriana whirled behind the Sheriff. She dug the muzzle of the .44 into his temple. "MASON! BACK OFF OR BLUBBER-BUTT GETS IT!!!"

I raised the muzzle of the Walther and said, reasonably, "Okay, Adriana, now nobody's going to get hurt, right?"

THWIT!

Adriana's eyes widened as the drugged needle hit home. She tried to pull the trigger on the Smith and Wesson, but she was already paralyzed.

"Bassss-tarrrdddd..."

Tali lowered her gausspistol, a regretful half-smile on her face, as Adriana collapsed to the ground.

Tali and I picked up Adriana, one of us supporting each arm. The Sheriff stood by, his mouth agape. "Um...I'm greatly obliged to you folks..."

I chucked a sleepgas grenade over my shoulder with a smirk on my face. The Sheriff disappeared in the billows of gas. "Oh, you'll get YOURS, Butterball. Just not from our friend, here. Nighty-night!"

My spouse and myself dragged Adriana over the drawbridge and into the night towards our pick up point. "Was that stunt with the gas grenade necessary?" Tali puffed a bit.

I raised an eyebrow. "Umm...Well, do YOU want to want to stick around and explain things when those goons wake up?"

Tali gave me a small grin. "No. Things around here are messed up enough."

I chuckled. "Miz Mason, I do believe you're getting the hang of this here business!"

I noticed a couple of shadowy figures lurking in the undergrowth near the castle and grinned. Robin Hood was in for a pleasant surprise...

"Matt, what will happen to her when we get back to HQ?"

"That depends entirely on the High Command, my love. The first step is to get the disarming codes from her..."

***

"Robin, who WERE those guys?"

"Who cares, Little John? We've our distraction - let's get Friar Tuck and the rest out of the Sheriff's clutches!"

"And don't forget the royal treasury!"

"Right!"

***

Part II

"So. Am I supposed to fucking THANK you or something?"

Adriana Vultoora glared at me contemptuously from across the table in her room in the Sanctuary ward of the TempCorps HQ Hospital. She comported her face into a 'lah-dee-dah' expression. "Okay. Thank-you-very-much-Major-Matthew-Mason-for-fucking-saving-the-universe-again!"

My expression remained mostly neutral, with just the hint of a smile. "You through yet?"

Adriana leaned back in her chair, arms crossed over her chest, weary smile on her face, eyes half-shut, a cigarette dangling from one hand. "Sure looks like it, doesn't it? I mean, I'm obviously washed up with the Corps, so the only thing left is a nice hospital vacation for the rest of my life, right?"

"That's up to you, really..."

Adriana leaned forward and screeched at the top of her lungs, "You're NOT fooling ANYBODY, MAJOR! As soon as I turn over the disarm codes, it's BRAINWASH CITY for me, RIGHT?!?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Who told you that?"

Adriana slumped back in her chair, her expression still angry. "Aw, cut me a break, Major! We've all gone through the training! We all know what they're talking about when they say 'Counseling'!"

"Do we?"

Adriana's eyes widened, and a look of mock insanity appeared on her face. "Of course! They're gonna pump me full of drugs, stick on the electrodes and ZAP! No more personality!"

I shrugged. "Pretty crude, if you ask me...but then again, I usually don't go about killing off people, even if they are only fictional characters...unless I have to...Why?"

Adriana regarded me seriously. "Why what?"

"Why'd you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Kill all those people."

"They needed killing. Besides, SOME of them I only hurt."

"Congratulations on your amazing restraint." My tone was very dry.

Adriana clasped her arms to her sides, emphasizing her generous decolletage'. Her expression was mock-innocent. "Yeah, I'm something else, aren't I?"

I nodded. "Yep. Just WHAT you are is what we're trying to figure-"

Adriana's face contorted in sudden fury. Before I could react, she leapt to her feet and backhanded me. "You BASTARD!"

I rubbed my face gingerly. "Feel better now?"

Adriana's angry, defiant expression crumbled as mercurically as it appeared. A look of utter grief came over her, and she collapsed in my lap, burying her head under my chin and sobbing. I stroked her hair gently.

***

Darkness had fallen, but the lights weren't on yet. Adriana and I were in the same position. I had closed my eyes; Adriana was snoring. I opened my eyes. Gently, I got up, cradling Adriana in my arms.

"Time to put you to bed, Adriana."

Adriana opened her eyes sleepily as I pulled the covers over her. "Stay with me? Please?"

I smiled sadly. "Sorry, I can't do it. You get some rest, and I'll see you in the morning."

I leaned over and gives her a quick hug. Adriana grabbed me and held me tight. "Don't leave!"

I disengaged, a trifle reluctantly. "I'll be nearby. If you really need me, ring the nurse and she'll get me. Okay?"

Adriana settled back down in the bed, a trifle disappointed. "Okay."

As I left the room, Adriana rapidly stripped under the covers. She called sweetly to me as I opened the door, "Ma-att!"

I turned. Adriana threw back the covers. "I love you!"

I grinned appreciatively as I exited.

"Me too."

Adriana smiled slyly and burrowed under the covers, hugging a spare pillow to her.

***

I punched the code on our front door, slouched into the living room and slumped into a recliner.

Tali eyed me with an expression of amused sympathy. "Hard day at the office, dear?"

I regarded my stockinged feet sourly. "Refresh my memory...was psychoanalyzing pretty little homicidal blonde vulpinoids part of my job description?"

Tali grinned. "How did it go?"

I raised an eyebrow and half-grinned. "Well, when I left she had just completely undressed and was inviting me to spend the night..."

"So? I'm surprised you are here."

"Not funny, my love. I DON'T go around taking advantage of my patients."

"You do not HAVE any patience."

"Not with YOU, at any rate... as for the rather..."

Tali tried to look innocent. "Bonkers? Looney? Meshugina?"

"Meshugina? Where'd you learn - Never mind. As for Agent Vultoora, I mind my dear old dad's advice. 'Son,' he used to tell me, 'never sleep with anybody crazier than you are!'"

"Umm. Well, what is MY excuse?"

"That's YOUR problem. C'mere, wench."

"Oooh! Doctor! Your hands are COLD!"

"Cold hands, warm heart..."

***

The next morning, Tali and I were breakfasting on bacon, eggs, toasted English muffins and tea. The kids were at boarding school (a necessary evil for TempCorps operatives. The school is located at HQ; in practice, Tali and I get to see Franq and Jesi every couple of days or so). Captain Lowchan Mason-Hartoh, our other partner/mate, was on a deep space mission in command of her cruiser, the Musashi. I broached the subject in a mock Viennese accent. "Vell, Doktor, how vould YOU diagnoze zis patient?"

Tali leaned back in her chair and looked thoughtful. "Well, let us look at the possibilities, shall we? First off, she simply could genuinely starved for love and affection be. She reprimanded was, for that incident a while back where she was bedding various historical figures..."

"Oh, I don't know...EVERYBODY needs a hobby..." I replied mildly.

"Ahem. In that case, she is lonely..."

"And homicidal. Don't forget the homicidal part. "

"I had not forgotten."

I gave Tali the fisheye. "So going on a murdering rampage of various 'fictional' villains was simply a cry for attention?"

"Exactly."

"I...see." I continued in a loud mutter, "No wonder the Nazis persecuted psychoanalysts."

"Look, YOU are the one doing the analysis. What do YOU think?"

I grimaced. "I think I'm going to turn this case over to the professional shrinks. I don't CARE what High Command thinks."

"And then?"

"And then what?"

"You KNOW what happens then. All the nasty convoluted twists get vacuumed out of her skull..."

I nodded unhappily. "Along with her personality. Yeah, I know, I know. But look, Tal' - I'm really NOT qualified for this job. I haven't had the training, I haven't had the experience..."

Tali shook her head firmly. "You have empathy, and you DO genuinely care about people. In my book, that is a DAMNED sight more important."

I grinned wryly. "So, once more into the breach, dear friends?"

Tali smiled. "Something like that...Besides, I have an idea."

"What, truth serum? It won't work. All agents are conditioned to go into fatal shock if any sort of truth drug is administered."

"I KNOW that, silly," Tali dimpled. Nice dimples. "This calls for a variation on the old good cop/bad cop bit. Attention she wants? Attention she will get..."

***

Whether Adriana was having pleasant dreams or not was, in the final analysis, largely irrelevant, as Tali woke her by the simple expedient of upending her bed, spilling her onto the floor. "AWRIGHT, Vultoora, getcher hands outa yer crotch and get dressed! It's time for a little field trip!"

Adriana sat on the floor, nude and bewildered, as Tali thrust a uniform, underwear, belt and boots at her. "You know where the 'fresher is! I want you out here in uniform and smelling like a DAISY in TEN MINUTES!"

"Screw off-YIPE!" Adriana suddenly took flight, courtesy of Tali's size 8 boot (steel reinforced toe, naturally). With a confused look in my direction, she bolted for the 'fresher, clothing in hand.

"Nice," I said admiringly.

Tali shrugged modestly. "Raising a couple of five-year-olds has sharpened my drill sergeant skills."

"So what's the variation on 'good cop/bad cop' you had in mind?"

Tali dimpled again. Even better, this time. "Simple. Bad cop/WORSE cop..."

***

It's amazing what a little motivation can do. Adriana was ready to go in eight minutes. "What the hell is going-"

"I don't recall giving you permission to speak, Agent Vultoora," I said in my coldest 'I'm the senior agent here and you're in a HEAP of trouble' tone of voice.

Adriana wilted a bit, confused. What had changed? The night before, I had been sympathetic. Now, I was acting like the biggest sonofabitch in creation. It was clear that something had drastically changed...

I held out my hand. Tali slapped a set of cuffs into my palm. Before Adriana could react, I had her hands cuffed snugly behind her. "What-where-"

I glowered at her.

Adriana wilted a bit more, not nearly as sure of herself as she had been earlier. "P-permission to speak, sir?"

I raised an eloquent eyebrow.

"What-where are we-?"

I grinned. It was not a pleasant grin. "Why, we're going Walkabout, Vultoora." Impressive. I didn't think a face covered with reddish fur could GO pale.

"W-W-wal-" Adriana stuttered.

Tali grinned, even worse. "Yes. Apparently it didn't take, the first time around."

***

The Temporal Corps version of Walkabout bears little resemblance to the ceremony practiced by certain aboriginal tribes; rather, it is a tour of spots that have been ruined beyond repair by careless or deliberate temporal meddling. It's a necessary evil for active-duty Corps candidates, but most Corps instructors hate Walkabout with a passion. There's something about seeing bodies twisted and turned beyond recognition, whole planets turned to radioactive wastelands or worse that...well, let's just say that, after Walkabout, the instructors have to spend a lot of time convincing the candidates NOT to drop out.

***

Me: "Sweet Sue Summerville-Died of a Broken Heart. Like your work, Agent Vultoora? After you killed DeBrew, Lance Sterling didn't have any excuse to stay in the territory, and the Mounties reassigned him. Sue had to stay with her father's mine. She died of loneliness within a year. Ironically, one of DeBrew's relatives is running the place, now. No, we don't have time to pay respects. We've got a lot of stops ahead."

***

Tali: "This? Oh, this is the remains of the last rebel base. Without a central villain to unify against, the rebellion broke up into squabbling factions. They wound up wiping themselves out, and now the Empire is stronger than ever. Let's keep moving."

***

Me: "Funny thing about Sheriff Kane: He would have taken care of Killer and his boys by himself, then retired. You, however, gave him a new mystery to solve and he decided to hang around-until he caught a stray slug during a barroom brawl. His wife will have to spoonfeed him mush for the rest of his life. Pity, eh?"

***

Tali: "Strange, it is not? You would not THINK that the Three Little Pigs would undergo delayed stress syndrome. I mean, they were going to cook the Big Bad Wolf in a pot of boiling water. I guess being near a large explosion like that would do it to anybody, though..."

***

Me: "That guy? The drunk in the gutter? Oh, he's the socialite you rescued as a boy. Instead of becoming a caped crusader, he wound up pissing away his father's fortune with his playboy habits. Meanwhile, crime in this town has reached epidemic levels. Naah, don't worry about him. If the drive-by shootings don't get him, the Sterno will. Keep moving."

***

Tali: "My, but this place looks odd. You just don't see major American cities done up pagoda-style. But, what the H'ahn, you stopped the goop from hitting the sewer, and the bad guys came in from Japan and took over. The police? Does not look like they did too good a job, to me."

***

Me: "Now, THIS was a total cluster-fuck. Not only did you interfere with the story, but you left an anachronistic piece of hardware behind! Naturally, the local Duke or whatever wound up getting ahold of the AK-47. And they ain't that hard to build, once you have the pattern. Sorry? Tell that to the field over there full of dead peasants."

***

Tali: "See the man on the horse? The dejected one? That's Prince Charming. Snow White just told him to go jump. Seems that seeing her stepmother's head explode in front of her-yes, the spell wore off when she died, and there was enough left to identify-so seeing that did something to her mind. Now, she's ch'akai (a term in Tali's native tongue which cannot be translated in a family story) with most of the Seven Dwarves, and she doesn't want to leave. Congratulations, you have totally, how does Matt say, screwed up the chain of succession in this kingdom. No, we can't go back. We have one more stop. Yes, we ARE going to rub your nose in it. Up to the back of your worthless HEAD."

***

Me: "Since Dorothy never had a chance to go up against the Wicked Witch of the West, she never did much here. Clicked her feet three times, went home and forgot about the whole thing. Glinda? Well, she did her best, but things...sorta fell apart after awhile. Then, the Flying Monkeys discovered just why certain rocks glowed at night...So we can't stick around the Emerald Glass Puddle for too long. We don't have radsuits on."

***

Part III

By the time we got back to HQ, handcuffs were no longer necessary. Adriana...well, I can't put it any better, but she looked like a kicked dog. Somewhere along the line, her bladder had lost it for some reason. Tali opened the door, and I took her cuffs off. "Get cleaned up," I said with just a hint of sympathy. Adriana nodded and trudged listlessly off to the 'fresher.

Tali nudged me. "Let's go," she murmured softly. "She needs to what she's seen, digest." I opened my mouth to argue that no, what she needed was a friendly shoulder to cry on, but the look in Tali's eye brooked no argument.

***

"How do you feel this morning?"

Adriana tried to sneer, but failed. "How do I look?"

I mulled over posssible responses, then shrugged and decided to be honest. "Like shit."

"Funny," Adriana croaked, "that's how I feel."

"At least you got a good night's sleep," Tali chided. "Matt and I spent the night alternately tossing, turning and trying to cuddle, but it didn't work at all well."

"Forgive me if-" Adriana coughed. I held a glass of juice to her lips. "Thanks. As I was saying," she indicated the straitjacket, "forgive me if I'm not sympathetic."

I shrugged. "You're the one who attempted suicide last night."

"It's funny, really; the glass outside her barred windows was supposed to shatterproof be," Tali chimed in.

Adriana smiled wanly. "Clean living, I guess. Next thing I know, I'm covered in orderlies,. doped up and wrapped up before I could slice my wrists. I still don't know whether that was a good thing or a bad thing."

I shrugged again. "You're here."

Adriana's smile vanished. "That's what I mean."

"Hrm," I said. "Are you going to behave?"

A sigh. "Like I have a choice?"

"Sure!" Tali beamed. "You can stay in your new spring wardrobe."

Adriana shot a dirty look at Tali and sighed again. "I'll be a good girl."

***

Despite her full night's (albeit sedated) sleep, Adriana didn't seem particularly hungry that morning, even though we'd moved things to the outside garden (with watchful orderlies serving). I wasn't, either, although Tali was happily demolishing some sort of omelet-like dish from her native Selene. It wiggled occasionally. Ick. I love my mate, but her dietary choices, sometimes...

"So," I said with utterly false cheer, "what shall we do today?"

"Go back to bed and have more nightmares," Adriana muttered.

I raised an eyebrow. "You made 'em."

Adriana gave up on toying with her meal, crossed her arms on the tabletop and rested her chin on her arms. "...Yeah, I did."

I mimicked her movements. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"Good question," Adriana murmured. A long pause. "...Wanna know why I joined the Corps?"

I nodded.

"To make a difference. To help people. To fight crime, and scum, and assholes..."

"Noble," I nodded.

"I took Walkabout first time through my training," Adriana said.

"We all did," Tali nodded.

"I saw the things that happened...but I said to myself, hey, that'll never happen to me." Adriana snorted. "Think they'll add my case to the tour?"

I shrugged. "Depends on you. If we can get the codes, it never has to have happened."

"And I get wiped out," Adriana says.

"Well, the memories do," I allowed. "You'll wind up back at HQ, and the only thing you'll know is that you never made it to your first target."

Adriana sighed. "I need to think."

I rose to my feet. "Take your time. Enjoy the garden for awhile. Get some sun."

***

"I've been thinking."

"And?"

"I need to kill myself."

I sighed. "Do we need to get the straitjacket-?"

"Not like that. You want the codes?"

"Yes."

"One condition. I pull the trigger."

"WHAT?!"

Adriana nodded. "It's the only way."

"Umm...huh?"

"Simple. I know which of the incidents was the first one."

"Go on," I said.

"We go to the first site. I trank myself before I get a chance to act. End of problem."

"For the Corps, yes...but you..."

"This version of me never exists."

Tali looked askance. "And you want that."

Adriana nodded. "...Yeah. That Walkabout...I'd just as soon not have to remember that Walkabout."

I realized that I'd been holding my breath and let it out in a whoosh. "Um."

Adriana grinned. "Yeah. Deal?"

I sighed. "I need to think."

Adriana rose to her feet. "Take your time. Enjoy the garden for awhile. Get some sun."

I snorted. "Very funny."

***

I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised when, after most of a day of discussion and arguing, High Command approved the idea. After all, it'd wrap things up nice and neat-and High Command likes things nice and neat.

Sometimes I really flat-out fucking HATE my job.

***

The sun was setting as Tali and I walked into Adriana's room. Adriana was lounging on the couch, a drink in one hand. "So?"

"Deal." My voice was flat.

"Okay, first thing in the morning, then," Adriana said.

My guts were a solid knot, and it showed on my face. "Fine. Any final requests?"

"Close the balcony doors." Tali complied. Adriana stood up and slid out of her robe. She grinned. "The condemned woman is going to eat well tonight..."

***

For the record, she did.

***

The Canadian Rockies, late 1800s:

"Nyah-hah-haaaah!" Dangerous Doug DeBrew chuckled. He pulled his lanky six-foot black-clad figure erect and twirled his long black mustachios evilly. "So, my pretty, are you willing to sign over the deed to your father's silver mine?"

"You BEAST! You CAD! NEVER!!!" Sweet Sue Summerville shrieked, struggling against the ropes that bound her to the large log in the sawmill.

"Very well, then, you doom YOURSELF!" DeBrew cried, throwing the levers that started the giant saw blade and put the log carrying the helpless maid towards its evil kiss...

***

I had to admit, it was a pretty nice day to die. Late spring, with all the flowers in bloom, trees all green, mild temperatures.

Adriana crouched in the bushes beside me, holding a single-shot trank rifle with telescopic sight. Tali crouched behind Adriana, gausspistol at the ready. High Command's orders. Trust but verify.

I glanced over at Adriana. "Last chance. We can still do this the..."

"No, we can't," Adriana whispered back. "Hush, now!"

A spashing gurgle from the millpond, and a head wearing a SCUBA mask appreared. The blonde vixen glanced around and, satisfied that she was unobserved, climbed noiselessly out of the water, pulling up her mask with a fiendish grin.

Special Agent Adriana Marie Vultoora was very good at her work.

From the fit of her wetsuit, I guessed that she was wearing nothing under it. She was clearly enjoying herself as she cocked a lethal-looking speargun.

An arm around my waist. Startled, I glanced over into a pair of intense dark eyes. A brief but intense kiss. "Goodbye, Matt. I love both of you."

THWIT!

The wetsuit-clad vixen slapped her thigh, glanced around and swung the speargun to bear on us. ""Bassss-tarrrdddd..." she hissed, as her eyes rolled back and she sank to the ground.

Beside me, the trank rifle clattered to the Canadian soil.

It was tough getting the wetsuit-clad figure under cover with eyes full of tears, but we managed. Somehow.

Approximately two minutes later, Lance Sterling of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police burst through the sawmill door. "Unhand her, you foul fiend!"

And after a brief struggle, Dan DeBrew was knocked unconscious.

And Sweet Sue Summerville was saved in the nick of time.

All was right in the worlds. All of them.

In the end, Special Agent Adriana Marie Vultoora was very, very good at her work.

www.FurBuy.com

***THE* Best Source for Free Live Furry Auctions**

Art © Cataroo
Used with permission

Treasure Grows There

by Richard Reid

"Hey; Bigears! Better wash any roots you find before using that toy scanner!" Yelled from several yards away.

"Hope Fuzzhead realizes the rule against hiring other harvesters includes *her* specialty." A hushed voice that might - or might not - have been intended for only one set of human ears.

"Keep that wagon out of my way; puppy girl." Whispered into her ear in passing.

Reya ignored the comments as the harvesters gathered in the station's cavernous waiting room. Then the foxtaur felt a different kind of presence by her right flank.

"Give the Furkind a break, everyone! She got her place fair and square just like everyone else."

Reya turned her head, finding it was a Planetary Park Service ranger defending her.

"Don't mind them; young lady. The old hands always bug the new folks." The ranger pointed to a sign marking the station exchange. "There's a lot of first timers spend everything to get here. Trick is to dig up enough meyintral to trade for a decent scanner. Company stocks a full selection."

"Thanks. I'll be fine." Reya paused as one of the other harvesters swung a sixty pound backpack scanner perilously close to her side.

"Looks like you did your research." The ranger smiled. "Best hauling setup here, I think." He turned and slipped between two 'all terrain' tricycles.

The most important bit was the scanner calibration when I got here. The foxtaur resisted the urge to inspect her balloon tired wagon and the harness she pulled it with. Instead she took out her map and compass. A moment to calculate which way she needed to go to reach her chosen search area; then she returned them to their belt pouches.

The waiting room PA speakers came to life; Reya half listening as a company representative recited the meyintral harvest rules she had read dozens of times. Then the outside doors rolled up and the harvesters surged forward.

The foxtaur padded forward amid the mass of harvesters, the wagon rolling easily behind her. An image of a hundred motorcycles roaring off a starting line spewing rooster tails of dirt flashed through her mind. *It's a good thing the Park Service doesn't allow us harvesters to use anything with an engine, I guess.*

It took Reya a few minutes to find an opening between assorted bicycles, tricycles, and wagons; then she turned southwest at a distance eating trot. Another half hour and the mob of harvesters was spread out far enough to leave her seemingly alone on the plain.

Only then did she stop for a moment to take in the scenery. A flat plain, with a few low hills the data package said had once been sand dunes. Bare sandy soil, black with soot and ash, with a few massive trees standing proudly above the scorched landscape.

All the plants here evolved to live with yearly fires, Reya remembered. The trees by growing thick bark for insulation; others by burying their seeds. With meyinthal and half a dozen other species growing tubers deep underground.

She looked around; quickly finding an area of uneven ground. *Someone dug there a year or so ago.* The foxtaur looked around the disturbed area, quickly finding what she was looking for. Streaks of white ash radiating from a small, conical depression. *Just like the photos. The dried vines burn several inches below the surface and the sandy soil slides into the hole.*

Reya bent down to sniff at the depression; the scents of ash, dirt, and charred plant matter instantly flooding her nose. Along with a faint undercurrent that made her smile.

"You won't make beans diggin in last year's holes"

The foxtaur looked up as a young man pedaled up, a trailer rolling behind his bicycle. He stopped with a high pitched squeal of brakes that made her ears flatten. "Kiddin aside, I hope you find enough to need that wagon." He held out his hand. "Brian Smith. I been here the last three harvests."

"Reya. Clan Stoneglen." She shook her head. "Just taking five here. I'll go a ways farther before really starting to look."

Brian chuckled. "Worst mistake first timers can make is not getting far enough from the stations. Second worst is going so far they spend all their time traveling." A pause. "Most people avoid the clusters of sand hills. They can be trouble."

His eyes started to wander, but Reya could tell he wasn't staring at her in the same way as most humans did. "You know; if the rules allowed it, I'd take you as a partner. You're ..." He stopped and looked away. "Sorry. I *know* you're not a beast of burden ..."

"I've been mistaken for worse." She flicked an ear. "Maybe I'll see you around." She started off again.

"Good luck," he yelled after her.

* * *

No one has been here this season. Reya smiled as she walked down into the dry streambed between two low hills. The only gap her map showed in the ridge for miles either way. She stopped a few yards farther on; staring at a wall of green foliage ahead of her.

The foxtaur pulled out her map, then shook her head. *Should have figured the pond would keep some plants green through the dry season.* She continued forward, finding just enough room between the slope of the sand hill and scorched but still green shrubbery to pull her wagon through.

Then the mass of green ended, leaving only a narrow strip of skeletal shrubs between two sand hills. Reya stopped, looking up the hills on either side. The near slope looked much like the plain had; blackened, with streaks of white ash. And pocked with imperfectly filled holes from harvest seasons past. *What has grown from the required replants might be worthwhile, but I'm not ready to settle for that yet.*

The hill beyond the skeletal shrubs seemed more splotches of white ash than blackened earth. *The data pack said most of this hadn't burned in several years ...* But meyintral was only one of several native plants that left similar white ash behind when burned. A closer examination would be necessary.

Reya unhitched the wagon from her harness and walked over to the line of shrubs. Even burned to coal black skeletons the shrubs formed an effective fence. Too dense to slip through even without the wagon. *I see what Brian meant about trouble.*

She stared at the masses of white ash. *Some of that must be meyintral. I need a way through or around or ...* The foxtaur glanced back at her wagon, then shook her head. She might be able to use the wagon as a platform to jump across, but that wouldn't get her back.

After long moments of studying the row of shrubs and wondering whether she could hack her way through, Reya turned back towards her wagon. *I'm not ready to spend days whittling my way through with a pocketknife.* At least not yet. *There has to be a better way. If only I could see it ...* Suddenly she lunged past the wagon, running up the slope.

Two minutes later the foxtaur was standing atop the ridge, panting hard. She took a moment to stare back across the plain; quickly picking out half a dozen blinking claim strobes marking where harvesters were digging. Then she turned to look at the line of shrubs.

It extended both ways from the pond as far as she could see. Continuous; yet not so uniform as it had seemed close up. There were several patches of green shrubbery besides that around the pond. Two or three spots where the fence of blackened sticks seemed less dense than the rest. And - just past the pond from where she stood - what looked like a path up the slope beyond the barrier.

A game trail! She remembered a picture from the data pack. Two legged reptiloid browsers; rarely found in areas open to meyintral harvest. *But it looks like a few were living off the shrubs around here.*

Reya ran down the hill. The trail seemed to end at the line of shrubs, not the pond. And surely a two ton animal could break its way through a few shrubs.

Twenty minutes later the foxtaur slipped through a narrow gap in the line of shrubs. She stared at a patch of white ash that seemed a hundred feet across; quickly picking out a dozen conical pits within its borders.

Reya sniffed one of the little pits. Ash. Dirt. Charred plant matter. And a pungent vegetable odor.

The wrong vegetable odor.

She sniffed at a couple more of the conical pits, then walked up the hill to another patch of white ash. Again she sniffed a conical depression.

More ash, dirt, and charred plant matter. Along with a strong vegetable odor that sent a tingle through her sinuses. *This is the place.* Reya counted two dozen small conical depressions within the patch of ash. And she thought there was a slight bulge in the ground. *This spot must be packed with tubers.*

After a moment studying the slope she scratched a small hole in the sandy soil, then headed back to the wagon to collect her shovel, claim marker, and trowel.

* * *

Four days later; in the station restaurant:

"It gets hungry out there, doesn't it?" Reya looked up from her breakfast as the speaker chuckled.

Brian Smith sat down across the table from her. "I come in for the buffet every three days. Unless I have a load to bring in sooner."

Reya flicked an ear. "I'll eat here whenever I come in."

"So did you find enough to trade for a scanner?"

"Enough for what's important."

"The stasis box for your family." Brian winked. "First thing all the harvesters do. And most have people claiming to be relatives coming out of the woodwork when they get home."

Reya nodded slowly. The healing properties of meyintral would make any harvester very popular when they brought their small family supply home. "That; and this." She pulled a golden card from a belt pouch, giggling as Brian's jaw dropped open.

"Your ticket to next harvest ... already?" he managed after a moment. "Without a decent scanner?"

"I'm a foxtaur." Reya's tongue curled over the tip of her nose. "I have all the scanner I need right here.

END

ConFurence 2002: *"Furry Noir"*

April 26-28, 2002

Hilton Burbank Airport and Convention Center

2500 Hollywood Way, Burbank, California Reservations: 818-843-6000 Standard Rooms: $99 per night

"This could be the start of a beautiful friendship."
-- H. Bogart

Guests of Honor:

Eric Garcia
Author of "Casual Rex"
(Visit casualrex.com)

Roz Gibson
Artist/Animator, creator of the popular "Jack Salem" character.

Ed Luena
Artist / Writer "Crow of the Bear Clan"

Early pre-registration special
before December 31, 2001
ONLY $30.00

Post CF12 Mail-in Pre-registration prices:
Early Pre-Registration before December 31, 2001: **$30.00**
Pre-registration January 1 through March 15, 2002: **$35.00**
(At-door registration at ConFurence 2002 will be $45)

The ConFurence Group, PO Box 84721, San Diego, CA 92138-4721
Fax/Voicemail: 619-523-9814. Email: info@confurence.net

©2001, The ConFurence Group, all rights reserved. **Illustration by Ed Luena, used with permission.** The ConFurence Group was founded in April of 1999 to promote anthropomorphic related events. Visit us at http://confurence.net for more information about ConFurence or our other events including CritterConDiego and our recent alliance with the staff of ZonieCon.

HAWK ON HARRU

PART THREE

By Brock Hoagland

I

The aftermath of any battle, even a small one, is awful. The wreckage of downed flyers lay upon the high desert of one of Harru's continental plateaus, the twisted metal bearing little resemblance to the sleek craft they had once been. Worse, much worse, than the wreckage of the flyers was the wreckage of what had once been living beings. Some crewmembers of the downed craft had fallen free to smash against the ground. Others had gone down with their ships and their bodies had been ripped and torn by jagged pieces of metal. The stench of blood and of the contents of spilled bowels hung over the twisted metal.

Hawk was thankful he was not among those removing the bodies. That task had been given to the prisoners. They in turn were fortunate in the limited nature of their gruesome task. Faced with overwhelming odds by the arrival of the armada from Mahz and having very little chance of escape, most of the cats that had attacked the survivors of the Araadan royal embassy had quickly chosen to surrender. Even the majority of the pilots of the single ship scouts who had stood a reasonable chance of escaping had chosen to land as a signal of their surrender, rather than flee. Cats were fierce fighters in battle, but they were also eminently practical and saw no shame in choosing discretion over valor when the battle was lost and valor would gain them nothing apart from certain death.

But not all had chosen surrender. The corvette that had been the flagship of the attackers and a cutter had fought and had had to be shot from the sky. It was from their wreckage that the bodies were being removed.

"I wonder why they chose to fight," Hawk mused out loud.

Mrrlau replied, "The corvette's crew would have been drawn from the traitorous clans that oppose the king's proposed treaty with Mahz. The stakes were too high for them to surrender. As for the crew of the cutter that fought, fffitt!" An all-purpose sound, in this case it was the feline equivalent of a shrug. "Perhaps they believed in the cause they served."

"Whatever their reason, you have to admire their courage if not their sense," added the third member of the trio observing the grim task.

Prince Nikkas was the commander of the Mahzian armada, a tall, handsome and well-built wolf with dark gray fur. Hawk was getting fairly good at judging the ages of species other than human by now. Nikkas looked to be in his mid-twenties, the same age as he and a bit older than Mrrlau. As near as Hawk could figure out he wasn't the crown prince since the princes had not yet sorted

out who was the alpha among them. But he was a leading contender. Command of this rescue expedition gave him a chance to further prove himself. Or to prove he shouldn't be a leading contender.

"How do you want to divide the spoils?" Nikkas asked. The surrendered cutters and scouts now belonged to the victors.

"Half apiece," she promptly responded.

"That hardly seems fair," Nikkas commented. "You did the fighting and the dying. All we did was show up and fire a few shots."

"If you hadn't shown up we would have lost and there would be no spoils for us to divide," Mrrlau pointed out.

"Fair enough. But since we have an odd number of cutters, you take the extra."

"Only if you'll take the extra single ship."

"Agreed."

"What about the prisoners?" Hawk inquired. "What do we do with them?"

"My company needs to be rebuilt," Mrrlau replied. Originally numbering over 150, her company now mustered less than forty survivors, about the size of a platoon. "These are good fighters. I'll enlist those willing and I expect all of them will be. It's not often that a clanless one gets a chance to be associated with the royal clan."

Hawk was surprised by her decision. "Your soldiers won't object to their former enemies taking the place of their fallen comrades?"

She looked at him oddly. "Why should they? The prisoners are young males without a clan. As such they're eager to work for anyone who will hire them, hoping to make a reputation as a fighter that will win them a spot in a clan's guards. Any one of my soldiers could have been among them if he hadn't won the opportunity to enlist in the royal guards. They aren't our enemies. Our enemies are the members of the traitorous clans that hired them to attack us."

Neither for the first time, nor for the last he suspected, Hawk was struck by how attitudes on Harru differed greatly from those on Earth. He shouldn't think of the prisoners as enemy soldiers captured in battle. They were more like the professional mercenaries who had existed in Europe up until the rise of standing national armies composed of citizens of the countries fielding them. As such, once taken prisoner they could switch sides with no one seeing anything wrong with it.

A young tom in the maroon and gold of Araada, which were also the colors used by its royal clan, approached them. Fastened to the cross straps across his chest were the badges of the royal clan and of a lieutenant. He saluted Mrrlau, raising his right hand shoulder high, fist tightly closed showing he could not unsheathe claws without injuring himself. "We're finished, Captain. All bodies and weapons have been recovered."

While some of the prisoners had been removing the bodies from the wreckage, others had been digging several long, shallow trenches. Nearby were stacks of energy rifles, energy pistols and swords.

"Very well, Lt. sa Tazia. Proceed."

Those of Mrrlau's company who had died in the battle had already been attended to. Energy pistols on low setting had played fan-shaped beams over

their bodies, burning away the flesh. The bones remaining were placed in ossuaries until they could be given final rest in the catacombs of Clan Talleron's nobly fallen, in whose service they had given the last full measure of devotion. The enemy dead were buried in the trenches their comrades dug for them. Hawk understood that since they had not been members of a clan or officially in the service of one when they had died their bones had no place in the catacombs of one. There was nothing shameful about the burial they were given. Still, it was kind of like the difference between being buried in an ordinary cemetery and being buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

After they had been covered up, one of their surviving comrades spoke. "They died fighting; what more need be said? May we all be so fortunate when we come to the end of our days." And that was that. Simple, practical and direct in the manner of cats.

Mrrlau addressed the gathering. "You have a choice. You can enlist in my company of the royal guards as privates or you can be prisoners. If you chose to be prisoners, who knows? The clans you now unofficially serve may win out and they may reward your devotion with a place in their guards."

There was a moment's silence before one of the prisoners spoke up. "Better a sure thing now than a maybe in the future. I'll join."

In fact, they all joined. Mrrlau now had slightly more than three platoons, just one short of full strength. Thaan sa Tazia now became the senior lieutenant and the senior sergeant was promoted to lieutenant. Other promotions followed until she had sufficient NCOs for three platoons. One of the new sergeants was Rruic, the young tom who had thrown his lot in with Hawk and Mrrlau when they had been captured shortly after the Earthman had come to this world. He was also the messenger among those sent out who had first made it to Mahz to bring their rescuers. The males among their attackers were divided between the platoons of her lieutenants and the one under her direct command. The handful of clanless females, mostly older than the toms and a tough-looking lot, joined the four survivors of her former all-female platoon, one of whom was promoted to sergeant. The new royal guards reclaimed their weapons from the waiting stacks.

Their business here concluded, Mrrlau's company and the Mahzian armada took off. A sadder task lay ahead of them; they were on their way to where the Araadan embassy had been attacked and destroyed. There they would recover the bodies of their fallen comrades, presumably including those of her aunt Queen Sidaris and of her husband, Jorrid. While most high technology had been lost in whatever planet-wide disaster had struck Harru centuries ago, some had been saved. Among those was an automatic mapping system that traced a flyer's route. Simple backtracking with any of the captured flyers would lead them there.

Mrrlau stood in the bow of her corvette, staring into the distance, apparently lost in thought, her long black hair blowing in the wind of their passage. Perhaps she was thinking of how many of her soldiers had been lost in the last few days. Perhaps she was thinking of what they'd find when they got where they were going. Whatever it was, her crew respected her privacy and left her to her thoughts.

Hawk did so as well until he figured she'd had long enough to brood. Joining her he said, "There's something I've been wondering. These females without a clan seem like a hard-bitten lot and the attitude towards them is less than favorable. Why is that?"

"*Hard-bitten,*" she replied, turning the term over upon her tongue. "I like that. Hard-bitten describes them well since life has bitten them hard. Unlike all males, few females leave their natal clan so those who do are a dubious sort. But there are always a few unsuited to clan life. Maybe they don't care for the strictures of clan life and want more independence. Maybe they're always quarreling with other clan members and decide they'd be happier elsewhere."

"What do you suppose was the reason Hruska was clanless?" Hruska was an older female, one of their former captors who like Rruic had thrown her lot in with theirs. While in her case it had been at the point of a gun, she had been true. She had helped them fight their way free and had died doing so.

"Fffitt! Since her former clan wanted nothing to do with her, they must have ejected her for some reason. Whatever it was, it was nothing minor. Maybe she killed a sister or a cousin. Worse yet, she may have been a coward."

Hawk thought it said something about the local society that cowardice should be considered worse than killing kin. "Hruska, a coward? I find that unlikely."

"So do I. She died fighting."

Which she had, even considering that Mrrlau had shot the crippled female through the head as she tried to claw her. All that mattered was that she had still been fighting when she had died.

II

By the time they reached the place where the Araadan embassy had been destroyed, several days had passed since the battle. The sky ships had gone down fairly close together. The frigate carrying Queen Sidaris had had no chance of escaping the speedier corvettes and cutters that had constituted the enemy force. So it had held its place in the sky, as had the pair of corvettes from Mrrlau's company that had been with it while the cutters of Thaan's platoon had escaped to carry word to her. The enemy ships that had also gone down lay nearby.

The frigate was especially torn up. It appeared not to have impacted the ground too hard as it lost lift as engines were damaged or destroyed. It was more of a forced landing than an outright crash. However, it was thoroughly riddled with holes from energy cannons. The attackers had apparently targeted it and continued to target it until they were satisfied there could be no survivors.

The smell here was even worse than it had been at the other battle site. Several days in the desert heat resulted in bodies well along in decomposition. The stomach-turning reek of decay hung heavy in the air. But not all were affected equally. Hawk noticed that the rabbit medic of Mrrlau's company and Yllis, the antelope girl who was her maid, stayed well away from the wreckage as did the herbivore medics and servants of the wolves of Mahz. Unlike them he could tolerate it if he forced himself. The cats and wolves appeared less

bothered. As carnivores they had more of a tolerance towards all aspects of death.

While there may have been no survivors, someone had been here. A number of tracks churned up the gray-white soil and scruffed the ochre fields of lichen.

"The hrrivpt! have been here," Prince Nikkas remarked.

"They always seem to turn up after a battle, scavenging whatever they can, little good though it does them," Mrrlau said. Noticing the guilty expressions on the newest members of her company, she asked, "What is it?"

The silence was profound until she pointed at one and sharply demanded, "Well?"

"Your Highness—"

"Captain," she corrected him. "For now I'm acting as an officer in the royal guards. You'll know when I'm acting as a princess."

"Captain, we didn't pick up after the battle. Our commander,"—he caught himself—"Our former commander said we had no time; we had to find the rest of you."

"*You left energy weapons where the hrrivpt! could find them?*" she shrieked, outraged.

"Captain, it wasn't our fault," the hapless soldier pleaded. "It was orders."

"Some orders must never be obeyed," she responded grimly.

Seeing the look on Hawk's face, Prince Nikkas explained, "No city *ever* risks energy weapons falling into the hands of the hrrivpt! Battles fought above their lands have been temporarily suspended to prevent that. Imagine one of their tribes with energy weapons, especially so rich a haul as they would have found here."

Hawk did imagine it and didn't like the images brought to mind. The dinosauroid hrrivpt! were implacably hostile to the civilized cities lying in what would be the oceanic basins if Harru had enough water to have oceans. Fortunately, the primitive dinosauroids had not advanced past the Stone Age. Their most potent weapon was a bone-and-sinew crossbow of limited power. Which meant they were no threat to anyone who remained in the sky above their continental plateaus. But once equip a tribe with energy weapons and they became a serious threat to anyone passing overhead, a threat that would be carried out.

"Haawk, take our cutters and scouts and find them. Do whatever you have to do, but get those weapons back," Mrrlau ordered. "I have to stay here so it's up to you." While he was a captain in the royal guards the same as she, there was no question as to whom outranked whom.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, saluting in the Araadan fashion. They might be lovers, but right now she was his commanding officer. Pointing towards one of the landed cutters, he bellowed, "Cutter crews and scout pilots, assemble over there!"

As soon as they were assembled he made his dispositions and issued his orders. He finished with, "One last thing. We'll get those weapons back and we'll kill anyone who fights. But we *won't* indulge in a massacre. Don't shoot anyone who doesn't resist."

The cats accepted the order without question. Thankfully, from what he had seen they were not inclined towards genocide.

"Man your flyers and let's go."

Hawk decided to fly aboard the cutter under the direct command of Lt. Thaan sa Tazia. The cutters spread out low to the ground while the scouts flew perhaps a mile above them, also spread in a line. Since they followed a trail they had to fly at a speed that was only a fraction of their crafts' top speed. Not that it was a difficult trail to follow. A tribe of hrrivpt! with their mounts and their herd animals left sign that anyone could read—the gray-white caliche surface broken to show darker soil beneath, lichen grazed down and an incredible amount of droppings.

"What do you think will happen when we catch up to them?" Hawk asked Thaan.

"They'll fight," the ginger tabby promptly responded. "Those guns represent incredible wealth to them. They won't give them up easily."

"Suppose they no longer have all the guns with them? Might they have hidden some knowing someone might come after them, planning to retrieve them later? Or might some of their fighters have ridden away in ones or twos, taking a gun with them to meet the rest of the tribe later after we've come and gone?"

Thaan looked at him oddly. "They've never acted like that before. When they have gotten guns in the past they've always kept them with the tribe. I hope whomever their Big One is doesn't think like you do, Haawk! That would be bad, very bad."

"So this isn't the first time they've gotten guns?"

"Of course not. It's impossible to keep them from getting an occasional gun. A single ship goes down now and then or its pilot is attacked and killed during the night. Even a cutter crew may be overwhelmed once in a great while. But we make it as hard as we can for them to get and keep guns. Otherwise it'd be very dangerous to fly over their uplands. We'd probably have to hunt them down and shoot them on sight until they learned not to shoot at a passing flyer. Chances are we'd have to kill most of them before the others learned that lesson. And they'd *still* shoot at any single ship they saw. A lone pilot would be too tempting for them."

So they would. A group of them had attacked him shortly after he'd come to this world. He had to get the guns back. Otherwise, the result might be a genocidal war.

They had to land come nightfall. The partly solar nature of the flyers' power supply meant that any that traveled after sunset soon exhausted its power and must spend a good part of the next day replenishing it. The next day they resumed their pursuit.

While the flyers might be traveling well below their top speed, they were flying much faster than hrrivpt! could travel. Shortly before noon one of the scouts overhead signaled their quarry was in sight. The cutter crews made ready for battle. A pair manned the single energy cannon carried on the cabin

roof of each ship while a second cat joined the one acting as pilot in the pilothouse. The remainder lined the railings with their rifles in hand.

Spotting them at almost the same instance, the hrrivpt! spilt into two groups. The larger group stayed with the herd and tried to hurry it along, if the fast walking pace that was the best their short-legged beasts were capable of could be described as hurrying. Those remaining behind gave every sign of intending to fight.

The scout flyers shot ahead. Per Hawk's orders they went to form a barrier on the other side of the hrrivpt! He hoped that if the dinosauroids saw that they were trapped and outmatched, they would quickly give up the fight.

"Do they ever surrender?" he asked.

"They're not stupid," Thaan replied. "They'll fight at first, but once we kill enough of them they'll quit."

Hawk hoped enough wouldn't be too many. "Let them fire the first shot."

"Why? We know they're going to fight. Why let them shoot first?"

"Indulge me."

"Things must be very strange back on your world. Fffitt! You're in command. Hold your fire until they shoot!" Thaan ordered.

The first shots came quickly. With no need to worry about elevation or windage due to a beam weapon's straight line of fire and with their electronic sights, Harruan energy rifles had an effective range of over a mile. A ragged volley lanced up from the hrrivpt! towards the scouts. Several shots struck home and one of the small flyers dropped from the sky, its pilot becoming separated from his craft. The small figure did not struggle futilely as it tumbled to the ground. He must have been killed outright by one of the shots that brought down his craft.

"*Open fire!*" Hawk roared. "*Kill any who shoot back!*"

Suiting his own actions to his command, he joined the cats in returning fire. The sizzle of energy rifles and the crackle and boom of energy cannons sounded as blue-white beams cut through the air, some pencil thin and others thicker than an arm. Through his lens sight he could see the hrrivpt! he targeted topple from its mount. A quick scan showed a number of others had also been cut down. One had died with its mount as a cannon burned through them both to slag the ground on the other side.

Then both sides waited as their guns recharged. The flyers used the time to close the distance. The hrrivpt!, having fired first last time, were ready again by several seconds. A second ragged volley lanced from the ground and through the air towards them. There were noticeably fewer beams this time. That did not mean they had no effect. A cutter lost speed as its engines sustained damage. A yowl of pain and rage rent the air as a cat near Hawk dropped his rifle and clutched his arm where he had been hit. Since beam weapons had no shocking power and cauterized the wounds they made, he stayed on his feet and drew his pistol, determined to seek revenge for his pain.

A chorus of soft chimes signaled their rifles were ready to fire again. This time Hawk missed. Not by much, but a miss is a miss. While a beam may have been as good as instantaneous, the time required to pull a trigger wasn't. He had misjudged by how much he needed to compensate for the flyer's forward

motion. Most of the cats did better. Energy weapons might be simple to use, but their users still needed practice to use them most effectively. The cats had had that practice and the hrrivpt! hadn't. The end came quickly as the dinosauroids lost each exchange of volleys by a wide margin. The few still living with rifles and pistols threw them to the ground and joined the main part of their tribe in flight.

"Stubborn," Thaan said. "They should have quit after one or two exchanges. That was enough to prove their courage. There's no sense in continuing a lost fight."

"They died fighting," Hawk commented.

The young lieutenant looked startled, then thoughtful. "Yes, so they did."

Hawk stared after the retreating tribe. There could still be a number of guns with them if their Big One had thought to save some of their treasure by not using it now. They should go after them, force them to halt and search their possessions thoroughly. Yet he was afraid if they did there would be more killing, likely a lot more, and all for a possibility Thaan regarded as remote. He hoped he would not someday come to regret his decision not to pursue.

Some of the scouts did take after the tribe. Even at a distance he could see bright beams of light lancing down towards the ground.

"What are they doing?" he demanded angrily. "I gave no orders for that!"

"They're not shooting hrrivpt!, Haawk. They're just shooting some of the herd beasts. The fresh meat will be welcome."

Travel rations for the cats of Araada consisted of a kind of pemmican. Nourishing, yet tough and monotonous. Hawk was tired of it himself despite the fact he supplemented it with the bread, nuts and dried fruit that were the travel rations for the city's herbivore citizens.

"What about the mounts we killed? Why not eat them?"

Thaan made a face and spat in cat-disgust. "Have you ever tasted a hrrivpt!'s mount? I'd have to be very hungry before I ate one. Herd beast is much tastier and a lot more tender."

Naturally, there was no thought of compensating the hrrivpt! for their lost animals. *'Bad blood between two peoples is rarely due to the actions of just one group,'* Hawk mussed. *'Both sides keep the feud going.'*

They landed to recover the guns. Prisoners weren't taken in the nasty little war between the hrrivpt! and the civilized Harruans and the dinosauroids never recovered their wounded. Hawk knew he couldn't stop what was going to happen. He tried to comfort himself with the thought that Araadans at least didn't appear to go out of their way to kill the dinosauroids. But they showed no mercy to the ones they did fight. He tried to ignore the occasional sizzle of an energy pistol behind him finishing off the wounded as he walked over to where lay the scout pilot who had died in the first volley.

"Damn it, they *did* fire first and their own people abandoned them to die," he told himself. It didn't help.

He stared down at the broken body. They'd taken several casualties, but this was their only fatality, a fatality that might have been avoided if he had given the order to fire first. Thaan had warned him that a fight was unavoidable and he had made a mistake that had cost the life of one of his command.

Thaan found him there. "Don' t blame yourself for this death, Haawk. You saw how the hrrivpt! continued to fight after it was clear they were losing badly. It would have gone the same if we had shot first. He might have died anyway or another in his place."

"Yes, it probably wouldn't have made any real difference. But it *might* have."

The tom could say nothing to that, so he changed the subject. "Let his comrades tend to him. You've other duties requiring your attention now."

Hawk looked up. Several cats stood nearby waiting to render their fallen comrade the final favor due him.

"What duties?"

"Thoren sa Purva was badly wounded. The medic says he's going to die in a few days. He doesn't want to die in bed. You're his captain, so it's up to you."

Hawk could guess what that meant. "Oh, fuck."

"It's your duty, Haawk."

"I know. Let's get it over with."

They found the injured tom on one of the cutters, sitting up leaning against its cabin attended by a hamster medic and a few friends. He looked very young, hardly more than a kitten. Hawk could see where the beam that had struck him down had entered at his right hip and passed through his body to exit just beneath his left shoulder. It was a wonder he was still alive, much less able to sit up and possibly live for a few more days. Lack of shocking power and self-sealing wounds again. Plus a testament to the toughness of feline physiology.

"There's no chance?" he asked the medic.

"There's always a chance," the hamster replied. "A very bad one in this case."

"Are you sure you don't want to take that chance, Thoren?" he asked the wounded soldier.

"I'd take the chance if I could find a willing female to share the bed with me, Captain. What a way to die!"

Hawk admired the young tom's ability to make a joke under the circumstances. He wondered if he would be able to do the same.

"But even if I did find her, I couldn't do either of us any good. Captain, I want to die fighting."

Hawk drew his .357 magnum. While he mostly used an energy rifle in preference to his .338 magnum, he still favored his revolver for its ability to fire six shots in less time than it took an energy pistol to recharge for its second shot. More than once that advantage had been crucial.

Thoren suddenly hissed then lashed out with a handful of claws. Hawk yelled in pain as they sank into his calf. His pistol roared and bucked. The tom jerked as the slug tore into his chest, then toppled over.

"Shit, that hurt!"

The hamster medic was there at once, dabbing an ointment onto the wounds. "Then maybe you shouldn't have let him claw you!" he snapped.

"He's right, Hawk," Thaan added. "You could have shot him as soon as he hissed. Still, it was good of you to let him draw final blood before he died."

Hawk didn't tell them he hadn't shot quicker because until Thoren had actually injured him he couldn't bring himself to shoot. Let them think what they might about his hesitation.

When they returned to where the Mahzian armada waited at the battle site he simply reported to Mrrlau, "Mission accomplished. It cost us two dead and several wounded, but we got the guns back."

"Many more would have died if you hadn't got them back, Haawk, including hrrivpt! A tribe with so many guns would quickly turn to conquering its neighbors besides being a peril to anyone who flew over their territory."

He nodded towards the wreckage. "Is there any chance any of them were taken prisoner? A queen would make for a powerful bargaining chip. Maybe your aunt and Jorrid are still alive."

"No. The traitors made sure all were dead. Soon after you left I identified the bodies of Queen Sidaris and of my husband."

"Shit. I'm very sorry, Mrrlau. I really did like Jorrid."

"I know. I wish he could have given me kittens beforehand. He'd have sired strong ones."

Hawk stared at her a moment, then realized there was no reason to expect cats to mourn as humans would in such a situation. "What now? Do we accept an escort from Prince Nikkas back to Araada?"

"No. I attended the councils where the king and queens discussed the provisions of our treaty with Mahz. With my aunt gone I have the authority to negotiate. Now that you're back we continue on to Mahz. I won't let the traitors win by stopping us. We owe it to those who died fighting them. Since I must now be princess and ambassador, you're in command of my guard. Captain, we leave immediately."

He saluted and watched her walk away. Despite everything she would not be turned from her course. Anyone who thought a mule was stubborn never knew a cat that had made its mind up about something.

III

"Dr. Cushing? May I have a few moments of your time?"

The elderly, bespectacled scientist finished the connection he was making before he turned his head to regard the man standing in the doorway to his basement lab. His visitor was in his thirties and fit looking although not particularly muscular. While he had had few dealings with them the physicist at once guessed who his visitor was.

"Yes?"

"Detective Sergeant Dave Schafer, Doctor. I'm investigating the disappearance of James Haakenson. I understand he was one of your grad students."

'Remain calm,' the scientist told himself. *'He can't have any solid evidence linking me to it.'* He immediately adopted the calm, waiting attitude he used when running a lengthy experiment.

"That's correct. My best one, in fact, and a fine young man. He ably assisted me on several projects."

The policeman came into the lab, his eyes quickly scanning it contents. He nodded towards the pair of pillars dominating the room, upon one of which the doctor had been working. "Those are rather interesting looking. For some experiment, I take it?"

"Quite so, but it's rather esoteric, I'm afraid."

"Meaning a layman wouldn't understand it."

Dr. Cushing smiled. "I'll let you in on a little secret. Theoretical physics has advanced to the point where most of the time we physicists don't understand it any better than a layman would. But please don't tell anyone. I wouldn't want our reputation as experts to be ruined."

Detective Schafer grinned in return. "Don't worry, Doctor, your little secret's safe with me. Every profession has secrets it wouldn't want to get out. Cops are very good at keeping secrets."

"I believe you said you were investigating the disappearance of Jim Haakenson?"

"It's been quite some time since he was last seen. Surely you noticed that?"

"Yes, and I've wondered about it. What's taken you so long to start your investigation?"

"It's been going on longer than you think. But it took quite awhile before anyone reported him as missing. Apparently he doesn't have any close relatives or even any close friends. It seems odd that you're not the one who reported him missing."

The physicist shrugged. "Not as odd as it may seem. I did wonder at his absence, but I really had no reason to be suspicious. And I'm afraid you're looking at the stereotype of the absent-minded professor. Since my wife died a few years back I don't have much interest in anything outside my work."

The detective nodded. "Yeah, I can see how that is. The thing is, the last time anyone can remember seeing him he was wearing a backpack and carrying a gun case. He seemed to be heading towards this building."

Dr. Cushing's heart sped up and he forced himself to remain calm. "I can see how that would pique your interest. Am I under suspicion? Think maybe I murdered my grad student to steal his ground-breaking theory and pass it off as my own?"

"No, nothing like that. So far it's just a standard missing person investigation. Most who go missing want to for some reason. Only a few turn up dead."

"I wish I could help you, Detective, but I'm afraid I can't. I can't even remember exactly when the last time I saw him was."

Schafer nodded. "That's usually how it goes with these investigations. Unless we can get on it right away, most people don't remember just when it was they last saw someone. Well, thanks for your time. I may have to talk to you again."

"Of course. Any time at all."

Once the policeman had left the elderly physicist got back to repairing his dimensional gate with an added sense of urgency. If the authorities correctly

decided he *did* have something to do with Jim's disappearance, he was going to need a working gate to show them that it was not a matter of foul play. Even then they might decide he had been criminally negligent. He knew that at his age and with his personality type prison would be a greater hell than it was intended to be. He might need to use the gate himself.

IV

Since they had arrived in Mahz Hawk had hardly seen Mrrlau. Her days were taken up with negotiating the treaty between her city-state and that of the wolves while the nights were filled with social functions, ones where a mere guard captain would be out of place. They still shared a bed, but most nights she was interested only in sleep. Consequently, he found himself with a lot of free time. Not that he hadn't found something to keep himself busy.

The small group regarded the heavily modified single person flyer. To its oval body had been added a pair of short wings. Hawk had no idea if it would make a difference or not, but he had made sure the wings were aerodynamically shaped for any lift they might provide. Their upper surfaces were covered with the black material that served as solar electric cells on Harru much more efficient than the best on Earth. Their undersides were painted in Araada's colors, maroon with a broad gold stripe. The whole reason for their being lay inside the wings, however. A scout couldn't carry an energy cannon with its weight and massive appetite for power. It could, however, carry more than its pilot's rifle. Nestled within each wing lay three energy rifles, the last foot of their barrels protruding.

"An interesting concept," Prince Nikkas allowed.

Thaan regarded it more dubiously. "I'm not sure I see much advantage in it. True, the added power panels wired to the rifles' power source does allow them to recharge much quicker. But is there much point in that when you can't aim them individually? The extra power to the engine would come in handy when fleeing from greater numbers or trying to overtake a flyer fleeing from you. I don't see much other use for it, though. This flyer of yours is only a little faster than a standard one."

Hawk answered his objections in reverse order. "On my world we've discovered that in aerial combat even a little faster can make a big difference. It allows you and not your foe to decide whether to initiate combat or to break away and gain a better position. And you're right that you can't aim the rifles individually. You're not supposed to; that's why they're sighted for their beams to converge. In that way they add their power together."

At least they did if he had his wave mechanics right and the beams added their power rather than canceling one another. If that were the case, recalculating and realignment were in order.

Thaan still appeared dubious and Prince Nikkas also appeared to see no point in it.

Hawk expounded upon the theory behind his new-style flyer. "Look, an energy rifle can burn through the hull of a single person flyer and kill its pilot or knock out its engine, right? But it doesn't have enough power to burn through

the hull of anything larger. So in battle their pilots shoot at each other or snipe at crewmembers on the larger ships. Maybe they can hit a cannon and take it out. However, unless there's a swarm of them they're more nuisances than threats to larger ships. But what if a scout flyer could burn through the hull and take out an engine?"

Prince Nikkas was the first to pick up on that. "Theoretically, one could shoot down a battleship. It would certainly pose a threat the battleship couldn't ignore."

"Exactly, Your Highness. Your enemy would have to divide his fire, including his cannons, between your larger ships and your scouts. And a scout is damn hard to hit with its tiny head-on profile. You'll have effectively reduced his firepower."

"While at the same time you've effectively increased yours," Thaan said excitedly. "Brilliant, Haawk!"

"Let's not get too carried away just yet," the Earthman temporized. "In theory, the numbers say it'll work. Practice may well be another matter. And I might not have the beams converging at the proper distance. That will almost certainly have to be adjusted. It could take considerable work to get everything just right or it might never work out."

"Then I suggest we put it to the test. I'll make the arraignments," Prince Nikkas said.

While he was making the arraignments the off-duty cats in what was now Hawk's company crowded around to examine the new craft. Some, the older ones, looked thoughtful, considering the possibilities but reserving judgement until it had been tested. The rest were clearly excited by it, checking it over closely and discussing it in animated voices. Not for the first time, Hawk was struck by how young most of the members of his company were. Thaan was only in his early twenties yet apart from several sergeants he was the oldest. Not surprising, he supposed, when you considered that on Harru male cats were forced to leave their natal clans just after mid-adolescence and his company consisted of such.

"Do you have a name for ships like this, Captain?" Rruic asked. Standing behind the young tom were the members of his squad.

"On my home world a craft like this is known as a fighter."

"*Fighter.*" Rruic tasted the term and grinned. "Fighter suits it well. A ship like this is surely a fighter! So would be anyone who flew it."

The man smiled. "So they are. They're an elite group and some of the best of the best. They're called fighter pilots."

"If you build more of these, my squad and I volunteer to be the first of your fighter pilots."

"Let's wait and see if it'll work. However, since you volunteered first you'll be the first ones chosen."

As they returned to examine Harru's first fighter once more, Hawk heard one of them comment, "Being a fighter pilot is sure to impress the females. I'll bet a fighter pilot would have no trouble getting invitations to husband trials."

'Looks like fighter jocks are the same on any world,' he mused. *'Always looking to score in bed and in the air.'*

Before the day was out the fighter was put to the test. Prince Nikkas arraigned for an old cutter scheduled for cutting up as the target ship. It would serve to prove the concept of a fighter. A cutter's hull was as thick as a battleship's—sufficient to stop an energy rifle from burning its way through and no practical thickness was sufficient to stop a cannon from doing the same. A skeleton crew had piloted it over the jungles outside Mahz, set the controls for half speed and then taken to individual flyers. A number of the small aircraft and a few cutters followed a short distance behind the target. Among them was Hawk aboard his fighter.

He lay stretched out on his belly upon the padded surface of its open cockpit, gripping the pair of levers that served as its simple controls. He looked at the cutter through the over-sized rifle lens that served as a gun sight, the numbers at its bottom giving the range to the target. However, he intended a more dramatic and realistic test than merely shooting it down from here.

Hawk shoved the throttle forward. His craft immediately shot forward, picking up speed until the wind whistled past, its windshield protecting him from the slipstream. He turned in a broad arc, heading away from the cutter. Far out, he looped around then speed in towards his target at an angle. Closer and closer he sped, glancing constantly through the gun sight, making sure his craft was aiming for the point he had selected on his target. One of the cutter's engines should lie there behind the shielding hull. The numbers ran down as the range rapidly decreased. As he drew closer he stared continuously through the lens, his thumb on the firing button. There was only about a second's window of opportunity when the fighter's gun beams would overlap sufficiently to burn through the hull. He was still far enough out that someone aboard the cutter would have a hard time hitting the tiny target his small craft presented when the numbers suddenly flashed red a half second before optimal firing range. His thumb convulsively jabbed down on the firing button. The rifles sizzled briefly and he could see the beams strike the cutter.

It continued on without apparent damage. Well, he couldn't expect success with his first shot. He curved away from it, running out to where he could set up another firing run.

Again he hurtled his tiny craft towards the larger one, closer and closer. He ran his gun sight's magnification up to maximum and peered through it. A black patch on the cutter's side showed where his first shot had burned through it. He must have been off just a little from where the engine lay. Running the magnification back down he waited for the numbers to flash red. They flashed and he fired. Still the cutter continued on. He turned away once more to ready another pass.

Again he sped in, the numbers flashed and he fired. For the third time there was no apparent damage. Hawk threw a quick glance towards the audience watching the test. There must be some there ready to call his fighter a failure. He was not about to give up yet, however. His shots were striking home and penetrating. He merely had to find the right spot. He'd make a dozen runs before he'd concede his fighter concept needed more refining. Perhaps he needed to get closer so the gun beams would lose less energy before they hit. All

that would require would be realigning the guns' point of convergence and reprogramming the moment their sight signaled firing range had been reached. He could test it again tomorrow.

There was no need for another test. On his fourth run immediately after he fired the cutter visibly slowed. An engine had been damaged or destroyed. Satisfied with the accomplishment, Hawk slowed and turned towards the audience. When he drew near he could hear them cheering. The cutter's skeleton crew sped away to re-board it. They would nurse the crippled craft back to Mahz where the damage would be carefully assessed. A realignment of the guns might still be called for or perhaps another pair added. He'd have to run the numbers to see if the tiny loss in the fighter's speed and slightly longer recharge time for the guns would be worth the extra firepower. That would be mere tinkering, though. He had proven the fighter concept.

V

"I hear the Mahzians are busy building these new flyers of yours, these fighters," Mrrlau said to Hawk in her chambers one evening.

"Yes, they are. They're quite taken with the concept, as is my entire company. We have an agreement whereby half the fighters the Mahzians build will go to us."

She walked over to the window and gazed out of it, obviously considering a matter of import. He kept quite, regarding her as she stood there. The dress of a princess was not much different from that of the captain in the royal guards she also was. Both were practically identical to that of normal female garb on Harru—shoulder pads, bikini top, knee-length loincloth and boots. She still wore her sword and pistol at her side. The only real difference was that she wore much more jewelry than her usual silvery headband with a single gem. Perhaps having fur made clothes of little importance on this world so its inhabitants had never developed the idea of clothing as status symbol.

Her decision reached, she turned back to him. "The treaty has been concluded. Two days from now there will be an official signing ceremony. Then we must return to Araada so that the king and queens may approve it. Captain, how many fighters and their pilots can you have ready in a week?"

"Pilots won't be a problem. Everyone in the company already knows how to fly and they're spending just as much time as they can in a fighter. I'd like to give them more time for target practice; your weapons are much easier to use than ours on Earth, but even so aerial gunnery is tricky. It's not really necessary, though. The real problem will be fighters. We'll only have fifty or sixty. I suppose I can ask Prince Nikkas if we can have more. Are you expecting trouble?"

"I doubt they'll attack us on our journey home. We'll have the Mahzian ambassador and his escort with us, a very large escort. The traitors would have to move openly against us if they wanted to prevent our return. I don't think they're ready for that just yet."

"Do you think they'll give up, Mrrlau?"

Her fur fluffed up, her lips drew back, her claws came out and she growled the same as any Earth feline just prior to battle. "No. They're too far committed to give up now. They'll challenge openly before long. Some clans will align with them, some with Clan Talleron and some will remain neutral."

"Civil war? Is there no other way?"

"No. It happens from time to time. The last civil war resulted in Clan Talleron becoming the royal clan. If we cannot win this time there will be a new royal clan, a stronger clan more adept at gaining allies. Such a clan would be better for Araada."

Lord knows Earth had enough dynastic struggles. Why should Harru be any different? It actually made sense in an extreme Darwinian way—rule by the fittest.

"But that will not happen. Clan Talleron *will* win."

"Will our Mahzian allies help?"

She stared at him, shocked by the very suggestion. "Of course not! We won't ask them. Should Clan Talleron bring dogs into it, every clan will turn against us."

'This is a family fight—outsiders keep out!' he thought.

"So we return and then what? Wait for them to make the first move?"

"We return, but not directly to the capital. Our first stop will be at a remote country estate. There's someone who's advice I wish to seek."

"And who would that be?"

"My father, the former king."

The week passed quickly. Hawk and the officers of his company attended the treaty signing ceremony and the Harruan equivalent of a formal ball held that night. But most of the week was not spent in social rounds. It was spent on the thousand and one preparations that needed to be made, each more important than the last. The hardest task was selecting who would fly the fighters; everyone wanted to be one of the chosen. He was trying to think of the fairest way to do so when he heard a massive cat fight erupt in the courtyard of his company's barracks. He ran outside to discover most of his company paired off, hissing and spitting at one another, claws and teeth bared. He saw that already there was fur missing and blood in evidence.

Drawing his revolver, Hawk fired into the air, then roared, "*What in hell is going on here?*"

"Challenge fight," Thaan explained. "The winners will pilot the fighters."

Simple, direct and very feline. "Meanwhile we risk someone being badly clawed and unfit for duty. The best aerial gunners will pilot them."

He should have thought of that right away. It was really a very simple matter. They used cutters at full speed to tow the targets. Every cat made one firing pass, then his target was checked. A miss and he was eliminated. The process was repeated until those remaining exactly matched the number of fighters available. Hawk did not take part. He would command the company's corvette. The losers would make up its crew and those of the cutters. In order to maintain the sense of cohesion so necessary for a military unit, he promised them that they would receive fighters as soon as they had enough.

The week ended and somehow everything that had to be done was done. The return to Araada got underway. Prince Nikkas had been selected as the Mahzian ambassador and given an escort that would make anyone think twice about attacking them. He traveled on a battleship crewed by an entire battalion. Another battalion manned a frigate, half a dozen corvettes and another half a dozen cutters. Mrrlau turned down an offer from Prince Nikkas to travel aboard the battleship where the accommodations would be more spacious and comfortable. She would return on an Araadan craft and that meant the corvette commanded by Hawk. They formed up just ahead of the battleship with the frigate trailing it and the rest of the corvettes and cutters surrounding them.

Mrrlau stood beside Hawk in the bow, watching as a dozen Araadan fighters and another dozen Mahzian ones shot past to scout ahead of them. She watched them enviously. "I'm so tired of being a princess and just want to be a plain captain once more! I want one of those fighters of yours, Haawk, just as soon as I am."

"I'll have one waiting for you. I've been meaning to ask; why the detour to see your father? Shouldn't we be returning directly to the capital?"

"We'll be returning soon enough. We'll send one of the cutters ahead with messages. It'll be safe enough; there'll be no point in the traitors attacking it now that the treaty has been concluded. We need to get them to move openly against us soon, hopefully before they're fully ready and before they can learn of these fighters of yours and build ones of their own. If the reports I've heard of them are true, they could prove decisive. My father is both clever and devious. If anyone can think of a scheme to get them to openly rebel, he can."

"Sound like useful qualities in a king. Why isn't he still king?"

"He's old, Haawk, and not the cat he once was. A husband has to be strong and virile so he can father strong kittens. When the queens decided to hold new husband trials he was invited to take part. Gerrus emerged the winner and was crowned. My father was given a suitably remote country estate to which he could retire. I've seen him a few times since. He's taken up hunting armed with only a sword and pistol."

Hawk remembered the encounter Mrrlau and he had had with a crab-spider. Harru's jungles produced some horrific monsters. It sounded as if her father had found a rather elaborate way to commit suicide.

She echoed his thought by saying proudly, "He will die fighting."

VI

Mrrlau's father's estate lay up one of the tributaries feeding the river that flowed through Araada. Jungle had been cleared for some distance back from the river to provide land for cultivation. Small clusters of buildings, composed primarily of blocks of towers and walls enclosing courtyards and gardens, dotted the countryside. The cluster lying nearest the jungle was his manor.

To say their arrival created a stir would be an understatement of considerable proportions. It would be a rarity for so many flyers to show up in this rural area at once. When most of them were painted in colors not those of Araada, the excitement they caused was magnified. Hawk had anticipated this

and had sent Rruic ahead with half his squad to alert the locals of their coming, many of whom were waiting for them. A crowd of several hundred composed primarily of various herbivore species was gathered outside the wall enclosing her father's home. They could not have all come from his manor and the number of small flyers parked nearby showed that they had not. The new arrivals landed their flyers a short distance away and disembarked.

Hawk had no trouble picking out Mrrlau's father. Slightly apart from the rest of the crowd was a small clump of young toms, the kind of newly clanless ones who formed into gangs ready for anything. It was ones like them who'd made up the majority of the gang that had captured Mrrlau and him. An old tom stood just in front of them. Like her his fur was dark gray, sporting a pattern of narrow black stripes. His hair was just as black and his eyes just as green as hers. He was tall and at one time must have been muscular, but no more. While it would not be accurate to say he was emaciated, with advancing age he had lost weight and muscle mass. There was a stiffness in his walk as he came forward, yet his carriage was erect and his step firm. Old he might be, but decrepit he wasn't. At least not yet.

"Good to see you again, Daughter."

"And you, Father."

They rubbed noses and cheeks together, purring. After a moment he broke it off to look the sole human there over.

"You must be Haawk."

Names in Araada were based upon that of the mother and the clan, so he introduced himself, "Hawk sa Alice, formerly of Clan Haakenson, Your Highness."

"Just Koress sa Sith now. I'm all done with titles, except for 'Father'."

"Father, may I introduce Prince Nikkas of the royal house, ambassador from Mahz to Araada."

Koress turned to the wolf standing there. "I trust you'll forgive me if I seem a bit reserved, Your Highness. I'm more accustomed to seeing a dog through a gun sight than as a visitor to my home, although none of them were from Mahz."

"I understand perfectly. I've seen a few cats through mine, myself."

For the first time in his life Hawk saw a true wolfish grin. In the older version of the fairy tale, a similar one must have the last sight Little Red Ridinghood saw.

"Come to think of it, I've seen more cats than dogs like that," Koress allowed, grinning in return.

It appeared that the two were going to hit it off.

"We've heard something of you here, Haawk," Koress continued. "Is it true you have a pistol that can be fired as fast as you can pull the trigger?"

"Yes, but after six shots it has to be reloaded. On the other hand, it's harder to use than one of your pistols and its range isn't nearly as great."

"Gain in one place, you lose in another. I've been looking over these fighters of yours. I must say that I'm quite intrigued by them."

"Thank you."

"Well, enough of an old cat's blatherings. Rather than standing around out here in the hot sun we should be taking our ease inside. There's more of you

than I've room for, but I can offer you and at least your senior officers my hospitality."

Gathered about a table, Mrrlau waited until refreshments had been served and small talk dispensed with before she broached the reason for their visit. "Father, you must have heard how some clans oppose this treaty and have done their best to prevent it. They've gone so far as to attack the royal embassy to Mahz."

"Yes, we've heard about that. Several of your messengers bringing word of the attack managed to get through. I was sorry to hear about Jorrid and Queen Sidaris. She was my favorite wife. Did you know she was the only one who wanted to wait another year or two before replacing me? Said I might have a good kitten or two left in me yet." He was silent a moment before saying, "Sorry. The older you get the more you dwell in the past. Go on."

"Clan Talleron can openly prepare for war since we were attacked. Our closest allied clans can as well. The traitorous ones must do so secretly, which means it'll take them longer. We need to find a way to force them into the open before their preparations are complete."

"And you came to me to think of such a way."

"Mother and my aunts always said you were a devious sort."

"Unlike Gerrus who's a bit too straightforward for a king. As it happens, I've been giving this matter some thought already. I thought someone might remember I'm of some use yet. Daughter, you and your cousins need a new husband."

Fffitt!" This time it was a dismissive sound. "I know that. I'm sure once this matter is settled the queens will announce husband trials for us."

"There's no need for trials. Your new husband is sitting at this table," Koress replied, grinning.

Hawk was as startled as Mrrlau looked. She glanced at him. "Haawk? But he can't father kittens! How can he be our husband?"

"Husbands aren't always chosen for their ability to father strong kittens. Sometimes they're chosen for diplomatic reasons."

Now everyone at the table appeared startled by the old tom's suggestion, Prince Nikkas most of all. "But I already have a wife and unlike you cats we wolves are monogamous!"

"No mistress or three on the side?"

"Well, yes, but that's different. She's not a wife. My wife is actually fond of her. However, she *won't* take kindly to the idea of my having more wives. I'll have her teeth at my throat!"

"Rest easy, Your Highness. I doubt the marriage will ever take place. The clans opposed to the treaty between our cities oppose it because of their hatred for canines. If they don't wish them for allies, how do you suppose they'll react to one marrying into the royal clan?"

Mrrlau grinned. "It will enrage them. They will challenge Clan Talleron openly before the marriage can take place."

"Exactly. It will force them to move before they are ready."

Prince Nikkas yipped in laughter. "I'm glad you were not still Araada's king when this treaty was negotiated. I think most of the advantages would have accrued to you!"

"You may be sure they would have, Your Highness," Koress grinned.

SHANDA FAN MART

SPECIAL NOTE! WE FOUND SOME EARLY SHANDA AND KATMANDU ISSUES IN A WAREHOUSE! LOOK FOR THE STAR BY THE ITEM! STOCK ON THESE "STAR" ISSUES IS SEVERELY LIMITED, WHEN THEY SELL OUT, THEY'RE GONE FOREVER!

*BEATRIX #1 (COLOR, VISION) $5.00
*BEATRIX #2 (B&W, VISION) $5.00

EXTINCTIONERS (SFA ISSUE #1) $2.95
EXTINCTIONERS #2 $2.95
EXTINCTIONERS #3 $2.95
EXTINCTIONERS #4 $2.95
EXTINCTIONERS #5 $2.95
EXTINCTIONERS #6 $2.95
EXTINCTIONERS #7 $2.95
EXTINCTIONERS #8 $2.95

FANTASTIC FURRY STORIES #1 $4.95

*GIANT SHANDA ANIMAL #1 $10.00
GIANT SHANDA ANIMAL #2 $8.00
GIANT SHANDA ANIMAL #3 $6.00
GIANT SHANDA ANIMAL #4 $4.95
GIANT SHANDA ANIMAL #5 $4.95

HERE COMES A CANDLE TRADE PAPERBACK-228 PAGES $24.95 PLUS $3.75 P&H

IN THE ZONE $6.95

*KATMANDU #5 $20.00
*KATMANDU #6 $20.00
*KATMANDU #9 $15.00
KATMANDU #14 $8.00
KATMANDU #15 $5.00
KATMANDU #16 $5.00
KATMANDU #17 $5.00
KATMANDU #18 $5.00
KATMANDU #19 $5.00
KATMANDU #20 $2.95
KATMANDU #21 $2.95
KATMANDU #22 $2.95
KATMANDU #23 $2.95

KATMANDU ANNUAL #1 $4.95
KATMANDU ANNUAL #2 $4.95

MAGIC CARPET #1 $4.95
MAGIC CARPET #2 $4.95
MAGIC CARPET #3 $4.95

MECHANIMOIDS (MU PRESS) SNOWBUNI TITLE $5.00

NEW HORIZONS #1 $6.00
NEW HORIZONS #2 $6.00
NEW HORIZONS #3 $6.00
NEW HORIZONS #4 $4.95
NEW HORIZONS #5 $4.95
NEW HORIZONS #6 $4.95
NEW HORIZONS #7 $4.95
NEW HORIZONS #8 $4.95
NEW HORIZONS #9 $4.95
NEW HORIZONS #10 $4.95

NAUTILUS #1 $2.95
NAUTILUS #2 $2.95
NAUTILUS #3 $2.96
NAUTILUS #4 $2.95
NAUTILUS #5 $2.95
NAUTILUS #6 $2.95
OR BUY ALL 6 FOR $15!

*SHANDA THE PANDA #5 $15.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #6 $10.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #8 $5.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #9 $10.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #10 $5.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #11 $5.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #12 $5.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #13 $5.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #14 $5.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #15 $5.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #16 $5.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #17 $5.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #18 $5.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #19 $5.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #20 $5.00
*SHANDA THE PANDA #21 $5.00
SHANDA THE PANDA #22 $2.95
SHANDA THE PANDA #23 $2.95

KATMANDU VELITES AND HOPLITES
80 PAGE COMIC REPRINTING
KATMANDU 1,2 & 3 WITH NEW STORY
ADULTS ONLY! $10.00

KATMANDU HANDBOOK
140 PAGES $15.00

SHANDAVERSE
130 PAGES $15.00

POSTAGE $2.00 EACH

SHANDA THE PANDA #24 $2.95
SHANDA THE PANDA #25 $4.95
SHANDA THE PANDA #26 $2.95
SHANDA THE PANDA #27 $2.95
SHANDA THE PANDA #28 $2.95
SHANDA THE PANDA #29 $2.95
SHANDA THE PANDA #30 $2.95
SHANDA THE PANDA #31 $2.95

SFA INTERNATIONAL VOL1 #1
FRENCHIE DOUDOU $4.50
SFA INTERNATIONAL VOL1 #2
FRENCHIE DOUDOU $4.50
OR BOTH FOR $7.00!

SFA INTERNATIONAL VOL 2 #1
SAVAGE SQUIRREL COMICS $4.95

SFA SPOTLIGHT
#1 VALIANT VARMINTS $4.95
#2 WOMEN IN FUR $4.95
#3 FURTUAL REALITY $4.95
#4 MORPHING PERIOD $4.95
#5 ZEBRA $4.95
#6 WOMEN IN FUR 2000 $4.95
#7 SUPERMEGATOPIA $4.95
#8 WOMEN IN FUR 2001 $4.95
#9 KNIGHT AND MOUSE $4.95
#10 PLUSH BEAUTIES $4.95
#11 SFA'S ATOMIC MOUSE $4.95

TALES OF THE MORPHING PERIOD ANNUAL #1 $4.95

WILD FRONTIER #1 $2.95
WILD FRONTIER #2 $2.95
OR BUY BOTH FOR $4.50!

ADULT DIGESTS

KATMANDU X 1 $6.00
KATMANDU X 2 $6.00
KATMANDU X 3 $6.00
KATMANDU X 4 $6.00
KATMANDU X 5 $6.00
KATMANDU X 6 $6.00
KATMANDU X 7 $6.00

SHANDA X 1 $5.00
SHANDA X 2 $5.00
SHANDA X 3 $6.00
SHANDA X 4 $6.00
SHANDA X 5 $6.00
SHANDA X 6 $6.00
SHANDA X 7 $6.00

AGE STATEMENT REQUIRED ON ALL ADULT DIGESTS!
PLEASE ADD $1.25 POSTAGE AND HANDLING PER ITEM UNLESS ORDERING 5 OR MORE ITEMS, THEN PLEASE SEND $5.00 P&H.(EXCEPT HERE COMES A CANDLE) DOUBLE POSTAGE FOR OUTSIDE OF THE CONTINENTAL UNITED STATES. REMEMBER NO ADULT DIGESTS SENT WITHOUT AGE STATEMENT! PLEASE ALLOW 3 WEEKS FOR PROCESSING. CREDIT VOUCHERS WILL BE SENT IN CASE OF ITEMS SELLING OUT.

FURRY NINJA HIGH SCHOOL

JULY 2002